WU SHUI BU DU
MY HUSBAND AND I SLEEP IN A COFFIN
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MY HUSBAND AND I SLEEP IN A COFFIN

我和老攻睡棺材

2

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MY HUSBAND AND I SLEEP IN A COFFIN VOL. 2

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• Character Guide & Glossary

Chapter 44:
Totally Blackened White Jade

AN ESSAY: My inner thoughts upon sending my husband out for a bag of salt, only for him to bring back a random man, and one covered head-to-toe in blood, at that.

Wang Xiaomie stood in the entrance of the house, a wooden spatula in hand and a sky-blue apron tied around his waist, fixing a dead-eyed stare upon the lump of flesh Wen Fengjin carried.

Yes, great. It's still dripping blood, so it's really fresh, probably recently butchered. Heh heh— Then realization set in and he nearly fainted on the spot, spatula and all. *S-s-s-somebody's dead?!*

He watched in terror as Wen Fengjin disdainfully tossed down the lump. The thing hit the floor with a wet noise and twitched painfully.

What the frick! It's still alive?!

Wang Xiaomie quickly tossed aside his spatula and squatted to poke at the bloodied gourd of a man with a trembling finger.

The guy weakly struggled to raise an arm. "Oughhh, don't poke meeee—"

"Oh sorry, sorry! Does it hurt a lot?" Wang Xiaomie hurriedly retracted his finger and rifled through the little pocket of his apron in a panic, searching for his phone. "Ambulance, ambulance! Fengjin, hurry and call an ambulance! There's so much blood—you've gotta hold on, bro!"

But before he could make the call, Wang Xiaomie suddenly thought of something. "Fengjin…" He looked at Wen Fengjin, who'd just pulled a

tissue from the tissue box at the entryway and was casually wiping blood off his fingers. Gulping, he asked, “You wouldn’t happen to be the one who beat him into this state, would you? In that case, if we call the police…”

Once they arrived, they wouldn’t even need to go looking for the culprit.

“It wasn’t me,” Wen Fengjin said. “I picked him up off the street.”

He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out something, which he held out to Wang Xiaomie. On inspection, it proved to be a palm-sized notepad, flipped to a specific page on which was written, in hideously crooked script—

Good Guy’s Handbook: When you meet someone who’s injured, help them.

That was Wang Xiaomie’s handwriting, and those were the Good Guy Rules he’d written down for Wen Fengjin.

Wang Xiaomie stared blankly at the hand holding that notepad, until Wen Fengjin finally squatted down. A bitter aroma wafted its way to his nose.

Wen Fengjin said, “I did as you told me, and saved him.”

It was hard to say what he was feeling right now. But as he looked at Wen Fengjin’s expressionless face, Wang Xiaomie suddenly wanted to reach out and very disrespectfully pat the demon lord’s head.

In fact, Little Puppy Wang—whose body and mind were one—was already acting on this thought the moment it popped into his head. He placed a hand on Wen Fengjin’s head and rubbed it back and forth, even crooning, “Yoshi~ yoshi~”

What a good boooooy, yes you aaaare!

When he came back to his senses, he was taken aback by his own actions. His claws froze in place. *Yoshi, my ass! I can't fuckin' believe I actually petted Wen Fengjin like he was a dog!*

He thought his hand would be slapped away, or that Wen Fengjin would be irritated, but—

Wen Fengjin smiled.

It wasn't a wide-mouthed sort of grin, but a reserved, close-lipped smile. The kind of smile you'd see on a child who was prideful but didn't like showing it, obstinately refusing to let you see their pride and happiness at receiving praise. As if time and space had been scrambled, Wang Xiaomie once again saw that boy he'd doted on years ago, who'd throw himself into his arms after class.

He started moving his frozen claws again, brushing through satiny silver hair with a quiet mumble. "You did well, Xiao-Wenzi."

Boss Wen made a face that looked something like this: ¯へ¯

He solemnly pressed his lips together and hummed in acknowledgment, a seemingly indifferent look on his face.

Wang Xiaomie kept petting his head, trying as hard as he could to resist smiling. After rewarding the big gray wolf who might've been suspected of asking for head rubs, Wang Xiaomie managed with some effort to get the dude on the floor lying properly face-up. He then hurried to the kitchen to fill up a tub of water, which he used to help the guy get all the sticky blood wiped off his body.

Boss Wen, straight-faced and all but surrounded by an aura of tiny flowers, gazed coldly at the man on the ground, then picked up the salt.

He then, just as coldly, said, “Forget him for now. I fed him blood. Xiaomie, I want soup.”

Wang Xiaomie was struck speechless.

Upon hearing such unreasonable words, the man’s piteous cries only grew louder as he writhed on the floor, crying out, “Aiyo, aiyo.” This startled Wang Xiaomie, who quickly glanced down at him.

“One more noise out of you and I’m kicking you out,” Wen Fengjin icily said as he gazed down at him.

The moans of ‘aiyo’ turned into quiet sobs. The big guy on the floor was vividly demonstrating what it was like to be simultaneously terrified and pitiful.

“There.” Seeing that the man on the floor knew his place quite well, Wen Fengjin nodded in satisfaction. He went back to looking at Wang Xiaomie, a smile on his frosty face, as he said, “I want soup, Xiaomie.”

There was a hint of warmth in the coldness. Within that warmth was another hint of spoiled cuteness. He wasn’t bothering in the slightest to disguise the difference in the way he treated them.

The guy lying on the floor like a corpse thought, *You could say he’s a really genuine guy.*

Wang Xiaomie, still unable to clean off Floor Bro’s face despite wiping at it for so long, gave up with a sigh. After confirming that his injuries were already healed, thanks to Wen Fengjin’s blood, he had Wen Fengjin carry him to the bathtub to soak in warm water. Hopefully, a soak would soften up the dried blood.

And then?

And then Wang Xiaomie picked up his spatula and went back to cooking dinner and stewing soup. As for the injured party? Let him stew—oh sorry, let him soak for now.

But, still concerned that the guy might currently be really weak, Wang Xiaomie shut Wen Fengjin in the bathroom to watch him, so that he wouldn't drown in their family tub. "You keep watch on him for a bit while I go make dinner."

There was the sound of a door closing, followed by a humming that gradually faded into the distance. Boss Wen stood there, emanating coldness, as he looked at the man in the tub with a smile that definitely didn't reach his eyes.

The man in question thought: *Wehhhh, I'm so scared!*

It wasn't until half an hour later, when Wang Xiaomie finished cooking and called them over to eat, that the guy had finally soaked off all the dirt he'd been covered in, revealing his face in the process.

Wang Xiaomie's eyes widened in astonishment. "It's you! The stalker!"

The newly revived man choked on his thanks before he could voice them, and awkwardly nodded instead.

I was wondering *why Wen Fengjin would so casually give his blood to an average guy… So it was him all along*.

Wen Fengjin, meanwhile, clearly had no intention of paying the guy any attention. As he walked into the kitchen to carry the dishes to the table, he shot him a cold sideways glance.

The man immediately froze from head to toe, then rushed after him like the most obsequious lackey you ever saw. "I'll carry it! Let me!"

Once they were all sitting at the dinner table, Wen Fengjin picked up his spoon and elegantly began to drink his soup, while the guy—who just moments ago was still acting shy and awkward—started shoving rice and vegetables into his mouth and wolfing them down like he hadn't eaten a thing in eight hundred years.

Wen Fengjin had initially been very much against letting this guy stay for dinner, let alone eat at the table with them. As far as he was concerned, he'd already saved his life in accordance with the principles written in The Little Notepad, so there was no need to keep him around.

"That food was made for *me*," he'd said, looking as vicious as a wolf guarding its food.

"We all know each other here, and it's not like we don't have an extra set of chopsticks…" Wang Xiaomie scratched his head as he watched the big guy gulp hungrily. As the guy's clothes were completely unwearable, he'd loaned him an extra bathrobe. "It's fine, isn't it? We could just let him stay for one meal."

Wen Fengjin stood there with folded arms, silently emanating coldness for a long moment, before walking into the kitchen, grabbing a bowl, and putting it on the floor. "Then he can eat here."

Wang Xiaomie was struck speechless. *Frickin' hell, are you a monster?!* Veins popping in irritation, he firmly placed the bowl on the table. "He's eating right here!" *Just look at how you're bullying the poor thing!*

In the end, all three of them sat down to eat at the same table. Wen Fengjin completely ignored the dude, while a dumbstruck Wang Xiaomie watched him eat as though supping on the world's finest delicacies,

suddenly feeling very proud of his own cooking skills. The way this guy ate was seriously flattering.

He sneakily studied the guy as he ate. The last few times Wang Xiaomie had been given the chance to look at the guy, his view had either been obscured by drying his own face, or because they were in a dark alley. When the guy started stalking him and Wen Fengjin after that, he was always so completely wrapped up that you could barely see any skin at all.

Wang Xiaomie had always thought he just hadn't been able to get a good look at the guy. But now, he realized it wasn't because he couldn't see properly at the time—it was that this bro really was *way* too dark-skinned.

And by dark-skinned, he meant genuinely black. Not black like a foreigner, but the kind of black you got when naturally dark skin was baked under the sun for at least half a month. He snuck a glance below the guy's neck—aiya, the skin there was just as dark. *To think someone other than one of our international friends is capable of being this naturally dark-skinned—amazing!* Wang Xiaomie silently exclaimed to himself.

Wen Fengjin's gaze quickly turned cold as he watched all this go down, then gave the still-eating man a quick once-over with an extremely critical eye. *Hm, not as attractive as me.* Reassured, Wen Fengjin went back to drinking his soup. *But just because he's unattractive doesn't make this okay! Shixiong can only look at me!*

A sour taste in his mouth, Wen Fengjin silently placed a hand under the table. On the surface, he appeared to be calmly drinking his soup. Meanwhile, that hand softly concentrated his qi…

Across from him, the happily eating man suddenly froze, and his eyes bulged. All of a sudden, he felt like an elephant had stepped on his foot!

“Cough, hack—!” He violently began to cough.

Wang Xiaomie recovered his senses and quickly poured him a bowl of soup, saying, “Hurry and drink some of this. There’s no need to eat so quickly. There’s still plenty in the pot—don’t go choking yourself now.”

“Thanks.” The man didn’t know why his foot suddenly hurt so much, but he took the hot soup in both hands, moved beyond words by the concern in Wang Xiaomie’s eyes. He said, eyes welling up, “You really are a good person, wehhh.”

“Heh heh.” Wang Xiaomie rubbed his nose with some embarrassment. “It’s nothing, really. You just drink up.”

“Uh-huh!”

Watching the man hold the soup, Wen Fengjin expressionlessly pulled back his hand. From that moment on, the cell phone sitting in first place on the blacklist of his heart finally welcomed a fellow sufferer into its ranks.

After dinner, the dark-skinned big bro energetically put away the dishes, and even scrambled to take over scrubbing the plates and wiping the table.

That done, he somewhat cautiously sat down on the sofa with a cup of Wang Xiaomie’s freshly steeped tea in his hands, casting fearful glances at Wen Fengjin, who was currently emanating cold air in his direction.

“Go on, then.” Wang Xiaomie sat down in front of him. “Tell us what happened to you, and why you were lying in the bushes with such terrible injuries.”

The dark-skinned big bro blinked his big black eyes, which stood out all the more when compared to his skin color, and quietly said: “Thank you

for helping me. I… My name is Bai Yu.”

“Pfft!” Wang Xiaomie covered his mouth, laughing so hard his entire body shook. “S-sorry, don’t mind me…”

I know I’m so dark that this name is practically a contradiction, but could you give me a little flippin’ respect here?! The black-skinned man with the name that meant “white jade” glared at Wang Xiaomie with his big ol’ eyes, only to lose his courage again upon catching a glimpse of Wen Fengjin.

“I’m actually a newly graduated college student… All that talk about being a disciple of the orthodox school was a lie. All that stuff I did, I taught myself from the illustrated books my grandpa left. I only just started working as an Artisan. The day I laid eyes on you was also the first time I put it into practice…”

Your first day putting your studies into practice, and you run into us, of all people… Wang Xiaomie couldn’t, for the life of him, say who had the worse luck here.

Chapter 45:
His Mental Capacity's Basically Zero

"THE REASON I STARTED STUDYING this stuff was to find my family. They've all been in this line of work. My grandpa disappeared when I was little, but I didn't know my family did this stuff back then. When I was around ten, my dad became the second to disappear. He never came back, even for my mother's funeral."

Bai Yu lowered his head, a dejected look on his dark face. His entire person seemed to wilt in a way that distinctly reminded Wang Xiaomie of the black labrador named Briquette who'd belonged to the girl downstairs in his old life. That labrador had been full of energy and very human to boot. It was a naughty little troublemaker most of the time, but whenever it did something wrong, it would look at its owner with the saddest, most pitiful face you'd ever seen.

Wang Xiaomie was about to offer him a word of comfort when Wen Fengjin coldly said, "We wanted to know why you were attacked, not your life story."

Hitting people where it hurts the second he opens his mouth—that's my Xiao-Wenzi, no doubt about it.

Bai Yu was clearly thrown off as well. After a moment, he shot Wen Fengjin an aggrieved, if terrified, glare. The power level of said glare was basically in the negatives. If his eyes weren't so dark, Wang Xiaomie would've thought he was trying to act cute.

“After that, I found an ancient book in the house while trying to investigate what really happened. And then I entered the trade!” Bai Yu pouted. “When I met you guys, I was sure my dad and grandpa’s disappearances must’ve had something to do with these ‘outsiders.’ So I started following you to get a better understanding of what these so-called outsiders were!”

At this, Wen Fengjin wasn’t the only one looking at him like he was an idiot. “You overrate yourself,” he said.

Even Wang Xiaomie wanted to put his hands on the guy’s shoulders and give him a good shake. *You actually had the guts to be that reckless right out of the gate?! You’re lucky it was us you ran into—no, you’re lucky it was* me *you ran into! Wen Fengjin could’ve sent you flying into the afterlife with a wave of his hand, you know?!*

Bai Yu seemed to belatedly realize his own rashness and stupidity. He cautiously lowered his head and looked up at them. “I was scared to death when I faced off against you…but you let me go. And I never saw you do anything when I was following you, either. Later, you even gave me an umbrella…so I started to think that *all* nonhumans were kindhearted, like you.” He gave a cowardly laugh. “Heh heh.”

Wang Xiaomie could not find words. *Heh, my ass! Does anything actually exist in that skull of yours?!*

Even Wen Fengjin was silent for once.

“I know you’re good people, and also that this, uh…dage seemed to dislike me following you.” The swarthy man cautiously looked at Wen Fengjin.

Are you saying it took him kicking you into a trash can a billion times for you to figure out he doesn't like you following us…

Wang Xiaomie expressionlessly picked up a nutcracker, cracked open some of the walnuts on the table, then placed them in front of Bai Yu. He said, with all the affection of a granny talking to a young guest, "Go on, have some more to eat." *Walnuts are good for the brain, after all.*

Bai Yu looked at the walnuts and immediately teared up, handling them like precious treasures as he ate them. "Weh, thank you. You really are a good person!"

They were silent at that.

"Keep talking." Wen Fengjin closed his eyes for a moment, decided to ignore the man across from him, then turned to readjust the shawl that was slipping off Wang Xiaomie's shoulders.

"Right." Bai Yu shoveled the walnuts into his mouth, quickly chewing before he continued. "After leaving you guys, I found someone who smelled similar to you, and he was in that mansion neighborhood near where you live, too! I've been following him the past few days. He didn't seem to notice me at first, but today he was out a little later than usual, so I followed him back to his neighborhood…"

At this point, a look of terror appeared on Bai Yu's swarthy face. He tightly interlaced his fingers, cold sweat dampening his forehead, as his whole body began to tremble. "And then… And then…"

A few dim streetlights had fruitlessly illuminated a tiny piece of the pitch-black night. He followed the man into a small side street, only to find the space before him completely empty, all of a sudden. His pupils shrank

as he felt a pain in the back of his neck. A low, hoarse voice spoke behind him. His final memory was of emotionless eyes and endless pain.

Nobody was capable of calmly accepting death, or remembering the moment in which they were cruelly murdered. So when Bai Yu sank into his memories with an empty look in his eyes, his breathing and his body becoming terrifyingly unnatural, Wang Xiaomie quickly pressed down on his hands! “Bai Yu!”

Bai Yu came back to himself with a jolt, staring woodenly at Wang Xiaomie. It wasn’t until a frowning Wen Fengjin pulled Wang Xiaomie’s hands away that Bai Yu fully regained his senses. But fear still enveloped him. You could see from his shaking hands and raised shoulders that he was filled with terror, and not doing well.

Still, Wang Xiaomie was neither overflowing with sympathy nor inclined to intervene. In truth, not only was this guy’s state absolutely pitiable, but he was also lacking in brain cells. He gazed sympathetically at Bai Yu and said, “Don’t think about that anymore. Although you really shouldn’t be going around bothering people…”

Bai Yu didn’t reply, but he did nod.

Moving suddenly, Wen Fengjin stood up and looked out the window, the abruptness of his actions causing the already frightened Bai Yu to immediately leap off the sofa. Wang Xiaomie, frowning, also looked toward the villa’s French window, outside of which could be seen a small fenced-in courtyard. “What’s wrong?” he quietly asked Wen Fengjin.

Wen Fengjin narrowed his eyes. When he responded, it was to turn to Bai Yu with the words: “That person followed you here.”

Wishing to rid himself of Bai Yu for good, the stranger had returned to the scene of the crime. The blood that dripped onto the ground as Wen Fengjin carried Bai Yu home was an easy trail to follow. Bai Yu looked like he was about to die on the spot. He was joined by a wide-eyed Wang Xiaomie, who clung tightly to Boss Wen's clothes. *What the fuck, the guy actually followed them here?!*

"It's nothing." Wen Fengjin, sensing Wang Xiaomie's distress, lifted a hand to pat his long hair. His lowered gaze made it difficult to see the look on his face, but when he spoke, it was in a gentle tone. "I won't let them so much as set a toe in the courtyard outside. Such filth would be most troublesome to clean away."

His cold killing intent and supreme confidence immediately wiped away Wang Xiaomie's fear. He wanted to say *My man is frickin' awesome!*

"But I have no obligation to take you in," Wen Fengjin said to Bai Yu. "You can leave."

Bai Yu's eyes immediately widened. "I-I-I—" he all but wailed aloud.

"Don't be like that!" Wang Xiaomie frowned. "You already said the guy followed him here, so what difference would there be between kicking him out and sending him to die? How about we shelter him for the night?"

Bai Yu's eyes instantly lit up, and he gazed imploringly at Wen Fengjin.

"No. I won't allow any man to sleep beside you and me." A deep furrow made itself known on Wen Fengjin's brow, even wrinkling the red mark stamped there for a moment.

"…It's not like we'd have him sleep in our casket. We're just letting him spend a night in the living room."

“Absolutely not!”

A beat of silence.

“Wait—what did you guys just say you sleep in?” Bai Yu asked through chattering teeth.

“A casket.”

Wang Xiaomie, so used to sleeping in a casket he momentarily forgot that the rest of the world didn’t do the same, didn’t realize he’d said anything wrong until Bai Yu started trembling. *Oh right… Normal people don’t sleep in caskets. And those who do, if not vampires, are…*

Bai Yu had clearly thought of the same answer. He spasmed, then fell over as stiff as a board. After being on edge all day and nearly kicking the bucket, he’d finally scared himself unconscious.

“…I *did* say we should stop sleeping in a casket. Just look at this.” Wang Xiaomie turned to Wen Fengjin with a sigh. “Now you can’t refuse to keep him, even if you wanted to.”

After all, the guy had already fainted—it wasn’t like they could just pick him up and toss him outside.

Wen Fengjin looked at Bai Yu lying in a dead faint on the floor, and after a moment of silence, said, “Let’s castrate him.”

If he’s castrated, he won’t count as being male, hmph.

Wang Xiaomie was speechless again.

Chapter 46:
In the Habit of Pretending

R*ING… RING…*

“Uuugh… Who is it this early in the morning?”

Wang Xiaomie sat up, hair tousled and eyes still shut, groping blindly outside the casket. It wasn’t until he finally got his hands on his continuously vibrating phone that he finally opened his eyes to locate the green button and press it. “Hello~” Wang Xiaomie yawned, drawling out his words as he listlessly said, “Who is it?”

On the other end, Lei-jie laughed at the sound of his incredibly sleepy voice. “It’s me, Lei-jie. I—”

A pair of thin but perfectly moist lips drew close to the phone—or, more accurately, drew close to the soft ear beside it. Their owner had yet to shed the indolence of early morning as he rested his chin on Wang Xiaomie’s shoulder, wrapping them both in his head of long silver hair. “Who is it, Shixiong…?”

That low, husky male voice seemed to carry an electric current as it passed through the phone’s microphone. It struck the eardrums with the hormonal urge unique to men in the early morning, worming its way up from the ears to the brain… Even Lei-jie shivered at the sound. She switched the phone from her left to her right and rubbed at her ear, unable to stop herself from blushing. “Ahem, I hope I wasn’t interrupting anything.”

“Hm? You’re fine.” Not understanding what she meant, Wang Xiaomie pulled the phone away to glance at the time before pressing it back to his ear. “It’s already six thirty. We would’ve been getting up soon anyway.”

He may not have understood her, but Wen Fengjin had. Lips slowly turning upward, he purposely moved to kiss the back of Wang Xiaomie’s ear, sucking with some force on the skin right there by the phone.

Suck!

The tiny wet noise was infinitely magnified.

Wang Xiaomie jolted, while Lei-jie expressionlessly rubbed her nose. *And here you said I wasn’t interrupting—how do you think you’re making this ol’ auntie who’s been single all thirty-plus years of her life feel, being so intimate first thing in the morning? Don’t think I won’t burn you, you damn lovebirds!*

“Don’t start trouble!” Bright red, Wang Xiaomie covered the “bitten” spot and blushingly whispered a warning at his lover, who’d already stepped back and was leaning against the casket with a wicked smile and a dark gaze.

The man began to chuckle, his definitely illegal, low-voiced laughter forcing Wang Xiaomie to turn around and resume his phone call with far from adequate confidence. Behind him, Wen Fengjin made a neutral humming sound, looking ready to devour as he pinned his dark gaze on Wang Xiaomie’s back.

They hadn’t done it in a long time.

Wen Fengjin leaned his elbow against the edge of the casket, his cheek propped gently on the back of his hand. Large swaths of bare chest

were revealed beneath his loose sleep robes, and silver hair spilled over his shoulders into the red casket. He looked as beautiful as the most perfect blade. Sadly, the guy he was facing failed to appreciate it.

“Did you need us for something, Lei-jie?” Wang Xiaomie asked.

Lei-jie took a moment to recover from the dog food[1] she’d just been fed, as well as the “static shock” she’d been hit with, before saying, “Zhen Bei was given the death penalty. They executed him yesterday.”

Wang Xiaomie was thrown off by this, immediately shedding his relaxed and drowsy expression. The mention of Zhen Bei brought to mind memories of the man’s dazzling smile, as well as his twisted personality. “…Right. I understand.”

“The Zhen family’s a mess right now—not only was Zhen Hao killed by Zhen Bei, but Zhen Bei was sent to prison, and now all the Zhen family has left is Zhen Mu. This incident affected the rest of the Zhens, too. The whole family’s now buried in a cloud of gloom. Mrs. Zhen went crazy after hearing that Zhen Hao was gone. She even wanted to send Zhen Mu to prison with his brother, constantly insisting that he was the killer.”

The memory of Zhen Mu kneeling on the ground and sobbing loudly at Zhen Bei’s execution brought Lei-jie a slight pang of sadness. Bad enough to have raised a brainless idiot like Zhen Hao—the woman had also brought up an actual living devil in the form of Zhen Bei. And now she wanted to imprison the only remaining son who still held any genuine affection for his family?

“The Zhen family’s such a bunch of fools!” she cursed. “Shit, that stupid woman!”

This news also left Wang Xiaomie quite speechless, thinking about the parents of the Zhen family—constantly spoiling their oldest son, then sending the other two to die with him? As the saying went, one type of rice can raise a hundred types of people. Frowning, he quietly asked, “What happened after that?”

Lei-jie sighed into the phone. “That old bitch has gone insane. But Zhen Mu’s kind of a friend of mine, in the end, so I’ve gotta do something. Everyone who went ‘to the fields’ back then knows the score, though—the only survivors were me, Xiao-Luo, and Zhen Mu, so it’s pretty obvious who sent Zhen Bei to the clink. Things aren’t exactly going great. The Zhen family’s attacking people like rabid dogs right now, so to tell the truth, I’m in a little trouble myself.”

Before Wang Xiaomie could say anything, Lei-jie then let out a hearty laugh, saying, “Don’t worry, though. When has Jiang Leilei ever been afraid of anybody?! After everything I’ve faced, I’m definitely no weakling! This is a good chance for me and Xiao-Luo to go take a vacation at my friend’s resort. Now that I have the Liaoyue Sword, I’m satisfied. I could always pick up a new trade to feed myself—oh, right! I’ve sold off most of the stuff you gave me. Tsk, tsk. I swear on my own mother, you won’t be able to guess how much money I got from the sales. Ai, even the cups you guys drink water out of were worth enough for me to live in luxury for ten years.”

Wang Xiaomie couldn’t resist laughing as he thought of the balance on his credit card. *I’m a millionaire now, heh heh, heh heh heh…*

Lei-jie felt even more cheerful upon hearing his laughter. She honestly felt that Wang Xiaomie was nothing like the big zongzi in mausoleums. Wen Fengjin felt exactly like one, but Wang Xiaomie made

her feel like she was looking at a small child in her house. Such a good child, too, that she just wanted to reach out and muss his hair.

“Oh, also, about that strange weapon you guys wanted me to look at—the one Zhen Bei used,” Lei-jie said. “I’ve got a lead on it.”

“Huh?!” Wang Xiaomie hurriedly asked, “You’ve figured out who made it?”

“Yeah, that weapon first appeared twenty years ago. A lot of the guys in the field had ’em. The one who made these things was called Bai Cheng, but both he and huge weapons like this disappeared shortly after they first showed up, and there’s been no intel on either of them since.”

“So that’s how it is…” That weapon looked like it had been made specifically for subduing Wen Fengjin and other beings like him. Wang Xiaomie wasn’t sure if he was just overthinking this, but it made him anxious. Now they’d run out of clues, and Lei-jie probably wouldn’t be able to find any more information.

After a few words of consolation from her, Wang Xiaomie said, with a small laugh, “This is honestly just me being paranoid. Speaking of which, Lei-jie, once this latest thing blows over, would you mind if I troubled you with another favor?”

Lei-jie let out a mirthful snort. “What trouble? Go on, say it!”

Wang Xiaomie’s frown relaxed. “I’d like to build a temple up on that mountain. It doesn’t matter how much it costs, but I want the temple’s name to be Xuanfeng.”

Transmigrating to the past, going to Xuanfeng Academy, personally planting that sapling at its entrance, and teaching all those children—all

these things were all indelibly engraved in his memory. He hated the academy, but that hate didn’t encompass everyone in it.

Wen Fengjin’s anger and despair in the past had killed all the kindness and tolerance in his heart, leading him to mercilessly end every last life in the academy. Though Wen Fengjin seemed to smile more often these days, and had softened quite a bit, with his recovered memories, Wang Xiaomie understood him far too well. Those smiles and expressions of kindness were all done in accordance with Wang Xiaomie’s preferences, like choices made in a video game.

If there was no objective for you to complete, would you have any feelings for an NPC?

Wang Xiaomie didn’t like slaughter, so Wen Fengjin exercised restraint and changed himself. Wang Xiaomie wanted to live a normal life, so Wen Fengjin remained on the surface world with a smile, eating meals and taking walks with him every day, visiting shopping centers and supermarkets…

Wang Xiaomie didn’t have the slightest doubt that if he were a bloodthirsty person, Wen Fengjin would have shown an entirely different face.

Wen Fengjin hadn’t changed—he’d grown accustomed to pretending. Besides, he’d been shaped by Wang Xiaomie’s death and rejection a thousand years ago. Wen Fengjin’s instinct was to make the most of the benefits available to him, while steering clear of negatives. He wanted to curry favor with the person he liked. He wanted to stand before Wang Xiaomie as a flawless, perfect person. This, too, was one of the fetters of

his disguise. *I most perfectly conform to your requirements; you will choose nothing but me.*

Love was possessive, powerfully wanting, exclusive—these aspects were magnified countless times within Wen Fengjin. Helping people and following rules were his answers to multiple-choice questions, which Wen Fengjin selected to earn himself love, just as if he were playing a dating sim. Outside that game, traveling unfettered through detached and aloof chatter, Wen Fengjin was still the same Wen Fengjin as ever.

Wang Xiaomie turned to look at the man currently leaning on an arm and smiling at him with an unrestrained, wicked air. It wasn't that he disliked this. It was just a bit troublesome, was all.

After a few more casual words with Lei-jie, Wang Xiaomie hung up.

The man brought a bitter, medicinal aroma with him as he approached, silver hair mingling with black as unimaginably soft lips jostled each other. He grasped the hand holding the phone, fingers sliding into the gaps to tightly grip each other…

After the kiss, Wen Fengjin pulled the gasping Wang Xiaomie into his embrace and kissed the top of his head. "I'm getting the urge to do it."

"We can't. Don't forget there's still someone downstairs."

Silence, and then: "Tch."

"…No tutting. We need to get up."

Wang Xiaomie got out of the casket and rearranged his clothes, while Wen Fengjin—who'd stepped out first—helped him tie his belt before finally fixing his own entirely open sleep robe.

He'd heard Wang Xiaomie say he wanted to build a temple atop the former location of Xuanfeng Academy, but Wen Fengjin didn't care in the slightest. Chilly fingers traced over the belt. The black irises that almost entirely filled his long, slender eyes were ice-cold.

He had no time for remembering the already dead.

Downstairs, Bai Yu was already fully awake and squatting on the sofa, his eyes the only thing visible from within the woolen blanket he'd wrapped himself in.

He wanted to leave, but someone might be waiting outside for him to walk right into their trap. Yet if he stayed…there were two guys of indeterminate species upstairs who slept in a casket.

Ah, why was life so hard?! Tears of sorrow flowed down Bai Yu's face, but as he was just feeling sorry for himself, footsteps sounded from upstairs. In that moment Bai Yu's hackles practically puffed out like a frightened dog's, and he stared unblinkingly at the gradually descending pair.

"Oh, you're awake." Wang Xiaomie casually greeted him upon arriving downstairs. He then walked over to the bathroom to wash up, with Wen Fengjin following him.

Bai Yu, who'd thought they were going to do something to him, widened his eyes. *Eh? That was it? Don't you guys want to eliminate me? You're not even gonna scare me a little?*

He simply stared like this as he watched Wang Xiaomie washing up, then watched as they both entered the kitchen. And then…

WTF, they really aren't gonna do anything?!

“Uh…” Bai Yu weakly raised a hand. “Are you guys r-really just gonna let me go?”

Wang Xiaomie, placing breakfast on the table, looked uncomprehendingly at him. “What else did you expect us to do?”

“…You could at least scare me a little. What if I blabbed about your existence?!”

Before Wang Xiaomie could answer, Wen Fengjin put down the bowls, cast him a light glance, and suddenly sneered. “Heh.”

Bai Yu instantly shrank into a ball with a whine. Feeling the stab of countless blades of ridicule, he thought: *Sorry guys, this is just how much of a chicken I am. Insert meme here: Strong-willed.jpg.*

Chapter 47:
Bai Yu's Family

"STOP MESSING AROUND and come have breakfast, Da-Bai."[2]

At Wang Xiaomie's call to breakfast, Bai Yu shot him a glare. "Who's Da-Bai?"

Wen Fengjin also glared.

Bai Yu wilted. "I'm Da-Bai."

Wang Xiaomie wanted to laugh and was trying desperately to resist. He finished setting the table, served up congee for Wen Fengjin and himself, then gave Bai Yu a bowl as well.

To be honest, he didn't dislike Bai Yu—in fact, he liked him quite a lot. The guy was extremely similar to a foolish roommate he'd had back in college, thus giving him a strange sense of familiarity. Bai Yu's eyes lit up at the sight of the food, and he finally put down the blanket he'd been huddling in to shuffle over to the table and dig into his bowl.

As the three of them ate, Boss Wen—who had not been able to satisfy a certain one of his needs—emitted a chilly air in the direction of the other two. A freezing Wang Xiaomie picked up a pickled vegetable and held it to Xiao-Wenzi's mouth, saying, "Here, have some pickled vegetables."

Boss Wen looked at this peasant food for three seconds, stopped emitting cold air, and opened his mouth to eat it—but he bit the tip of the chopsticks as he did so, his moist, red lips opening slightly to reveal neat rows of pearly white teeth as they gently held the black chopsticks between

them. He propped his cheek against a hand, slender eyes tilting ever so slightly upward, and simply looked at Wang Xiaomie without a word.

Half a minute later, Wang Xiaomie's face was explosively red as he repeatedly mumbled, "I get it, I get it… I get it already, okay!"

Those pearly white teeth let go, the cold air stopped, and Wen Fengjin stopped pulling faces as well.

Meanwhile, off to the side, Bai Yu was very much full due to eating dog food with his thin congee.

By the time he was done eating breakfast and enthusiastically clearing away the dishes, that little bit of fear in Bai Yu's heart was completely gone.

"Um, thank you for rescuing me and letting me stay the night. I swear I won't blab about you. I should probably get going before it gets any later." Bai Yu picked up the blanket and quickly folded it before setting it on the sofa, somewhat awkwardly scratching his head as he said to Wang Xiaomie and Wen Fengjin, "Do you still have what's left of my clothes? My phone and what little money I have were in there, and this place is real far from my house, so without any money, I can't call a cab…"

"No need to thank us. Your clothes are still here." Wang Xiaomie turned around to grab a bag from the bathroom, saying, "They were covered in blood, so I put them in here—you can take a look and see if anything's missing."

"Thanks, seriously."

Bai Yu opened the bag and sifted through the clothes inside, causing a few pieces of bloody clothing and a black iron bar to fall out with a clang.

He hurriedly picked them back up again, carefully placing the black iron bar back in the equally black bag.

“What’s that?” Wang Xiaomie curiously asked.

“Oh, this? It’s a weapon I made based on that old book I found. I didn’t have the right materials or skills, though, so this was the best I could manage. But don’t underestimate it—look at this.” Bai Yu showed the black iron bar to Wang Xiaomie, then gave a short demonstration. “I hold it up like this, then aim it at this bloodstain… These clothes have that bad guy’s scent on them, so…”

The black iron bar struck that piece of cloth, and the cloth made a ripping noise in that instant. Something invisible seemed to disperse after that strike. When the iron bar was moved away, the bloodstained cloth still looked the same as ever, but something had indeed been eliminated by it!

Zhen Bei’s weapon!

Wang Xiaomie’s pupils shrank with shock, and he quickly turned to look at Wen Fengjin, whose face had also darkened as well.

Bai Yu, having missed the looks on both of their faces, was still foolishly smiling as he bragged, “What do you think? Isn’t it amazing? Heh heh heh. This iron bar pretty much only has the one use these days, but I saw my dad and grandpa’s notes in the book, and they said that my grandpa once made the finest versions of this weapon. Black indicates low quality, while the finest are gold. I read that a blow from one of those could scatter all those creatures to bits!”

Bai Yu kept proudly bragging about his precious treasure—only to find himself being shoved hard against the wall by Wen Fengjin as he lifted him by the neck!

“*Cough, hack.*… Wh-what are you doing—” Bai Yu’s eyes were practically bulging out of his head, legs dangling as he scrabbled ineffectually against the large, iron-hard hand choking his throat. “Let me go! *Help!*”

Wen Fengjin was unmoved by his pleas. His eyes quickly turned bloodred, and his voice was covered in a layer of frost as he pointedly enunciated each syllable of his question. “You know Zhen Bei?”

Zhen Bei had shot Wang Xiaomie twice back in the mausoleum, and nearly killed Wen Fengjin with his tricks as well. Though Zhen Bei ultimately got the punishment he deserved, it wasn’t nearly enough to assuage Wen Fengjin’s anger. If Wang Xiaomie weren’t there to hold him back, he might even have had Mu Yi and the others eat him alive, and that would be considered a *light* sentence!

“Fengjin!” Startled, Wang Xiaomie stepped forward in a rush to tug at Wen Fengjin’s arm—Da-Bai’s eyes were practically rolling back into his head! “Don’t be so quick to act. It might not be him!” An idea popped into his head, and he hurriedly asked Bai Yu, “Who is Bai Cheng to you?”

Bai Yu kicked his legs as he gasped, “Bai Cheng… Bai Cheng is my grandpa…”

“I knew it…” Wang Xiaomie felt a headache coming on as he tugged at Wen Fengjin. This was really far too coincidental—enough to make you wonder if all of this was orchestrated by someone. “Let him go. He’s not the one who gave Zhen Bei his weapon—it was probably his grandfather.”

Wen Fengjin cast a distrustful glance at Bai Yu, who was close to passing out, and finally let go with a scornful snort.

“Cough, hack, gasp…” After hitting the floor, Bai Yu squatted down with his hands around his neck and coughed for a good long while before finally recovering. He kept a wary eye on Wen Fengjin as he eagerly asked, “How do you guys know my grandpa’s name? Have you met him?! Tell me when!”

Pinned under that wide-eyed gaze, Wang Xiaomie let out a sigh. He first patted a noticeably unhappy Wen Fengjin, then said, “Fengjin, bring Kaiming over here, please.”

Wen Fengjin lowered his gaze toward Bai Yu on the floor.

“It’s fine. Don’t worry, I’ll be careful.”

Only after Wang Xiaomie quietly said these words did Wen Fengjin finally turn and head upstairs to get Kaiming. Not because he absolutely had to be suspicious of someone, but because this really was too much of a coincidence. They’d inquired about that weapon, and someone related to it had shown up right on their doorstep—almost as if some unseen eyes were watching them from the shadows. Ever since encountering a hardcore sadist like Zhen Bei, Wang Xiaomie had truly come to embody the phrase “once bitten, twice shy.” You never knew if this man might be yet another big boss character, hiding behind a good-guy exterior.

Wang Xiaomie squatted down, rubbing at his neck as he said, “We’ve never actually met your grandpa, but we did come across an unnaturally long, copper-gold hammer. Someone nearly killed us with it.” The natural upward curve of his mouth straightened out, black, moist eyes losing a measure of gentleness that was replaced by ice as Wang Xiaomie gazed directly at Bai Yu. “We looked into it afterward, and found the creator of that little hammer was named Bai Cheng.”

Clean, neatly trimmed, faintly pink nails loomed large in Bai Yu's field of vision before finally poking his forehead. "Don't blame me for being paranoid," the man across from him said with cold detachment. "I'm not a single man anymore—I need to protect the one I care about."

In this instant, his impression of Wang Xiaomie was flipped on its head. The man in front of Bai Yu changed from a big soft boy wearing an apron and cooking meals into a man whose gaze was as sharp as a partially unsheathed blade. Surprisingly similar to the other guy!

Bai Yu opened his mouth, but not a word came out. The grandpa he remembered was a loving person. He had no way of knowing if that grandpa had truly helped someone antagonize the man before him.

So he chose silence.

As he watched the dark, dark man in front of him wither, the look on Wang Xiaomie's face dissipated as well. Gosh, Wen Fengjin's mannerisms were really hard to learn. His eyes hurt from all that glaring.

"All right, you don't need to overthink it. Even if your grandpa *did* make the weapon, as long as he didn't participate in what happened to us, it had nothing to do with him. We'll let you go." Wang Xiaomie rubbed his neck again, watching as Bai Yu suddenly raised his head. His eyes, set against his dark skin, almost seemed to glow with light.

"Really?!" Bai Yu looked at him with a hopeful gaze, asking, "You'll really let me go?" *You won't take your anger out on me or silence me permanently or anything?!*

"Of course. We're not villains, after all." Wang Xiaomie unsettled himself with those words—why did that feel so strange to say? But Wen

Fengjin conveniently came down the stairs at this same moment, carrying Kaiming in his hand.

Kaiming was already hot to the touch when Wang Xiaomie reached out for it. If it could talk, it would probably have yelled at Wen Fengjin, *Stay away from me!*

Once Kaiming had cooled down, Wang Xiaomie stuck it against Bai Yu's face with a *thwap*. Bai Yu stared blankly. "What're you doing?"

In return, Wang Xiaomie asked, "Is it hot?"

Bai Yu shook his head. "It's not hot. You guys have air conditioning."

Wang Xiaomie's mouth twitched. "…I was asking if this knife is hot."

"It's not. It's kinda cool." Bai Yu squatted dim-wittedly on the floor, Kaiming still stuck to his face. "Why would a knife be hot?"

…It seemed there was no problem here. Wang Xiaomie exchanged a look with Wen Fengjin, and finally relaxed completely, no longer looking at Bai Yu with the vigilance he'd held before.

"All right, Da-Bai, we can trust you now." Wang Xiaomie pulled him back up to his feet as he asked, "Can you tell us about your grandpa?"

Li Manman was working the swing shift today, from 2 a.m. to 8:30. She'd been frustratingly exhausted to begin with, and her boyfriend had been acting really cold lately to boot. As she watched the screen of her cell phone fade to black, Li Manman cursed. "The bastard won't even answer my texts!"

She angrily tossed the phone into her bag. Standing before her front door, she dug for her keys, and finally pulled out a keyring with a fuzzy

pink ball hanging from it.

At that moment, a *clink* sounded behind her, as if something had fallen on the floor.

Li Manman spun around to look and found a golden ring lying silently at the doorway of the home across from hers.

Her eyes instantly widened, and she joyfully grabbed the ring off the floor. The plain-looking ring had no patterns or decorations on it, but there was a ‘Bai’ finely engraved on the inside.

This color and the engraving—it definitely had to be gold! Li Manman happily stretched out her hand, trying the ring on each of her fingers in succession. *Wow, it suits me perfectly~*

She excitedly rubbed at the surface of the ring. Bai? If she remembered right, the tenant of this place was named Bai. But who cared?! She’d picked up the ring! Finders keepers, that was the rule! *Who asked the guy to be so careless with such valuable items? Heh—if he has anyone to blame, he should blame his own bad luck.* Besides, when she looked at the way the ring’s surface emitted a plain yet steady halo of light, she couldn’t help but think, *This should have been on the pretty fingers of a girl like me to begin with.*

She put on the ring and turned to open her door, thinking without a hint of concern that she should go to a gold store to get the name scrubbed off one of these days.

It was 4 p.m. Bai Yu walked ahead in clothes borrowed from Wang Xiaomie, Wang Xiaomie walked in the middle, and Wen Fengjin brought up the rear, a faint look of disdain in his eyes as he gazed down the dirty corridor with its discarded flowerpots and cardboard containers haphazardly

piled up by who-knew-which household. The entire stairwell was dimly lit and foul-smelling, with random splashes of who-knew-what smearing the walls as well. The sight was nauseating. To top it all off, the railing on the stairs was also covered in a heavy layer of dust. Wen Fengjin's brow furrowed deeply as he scooped up his long silver hair with one hand and Wang Xiaomie's black hair with the other, the latter having nearly touched the dust due to its swaying back and forth as he walked.

"I never thought you guys would come with me," Bai Yu gasped as he climbed the stairs. "My place is up ahead. All the notebooks my grandpa left me are there."

Compelled by a strange feeling of foreboding, Wang Xiaomie had been unable to simply leave things as they were. So he'd followed Bai Yu. "I never thought you'd agree to let us see the notebooks, either. Weren't they passed down through your family?"

"Heh heh. Don't worry about that. I actually don't understand a lot of what's written in them myself. If you can figure them out, it could even be a learning opportunity for me!"

They finally reached the door, and a panting Bai Yu opened it.

The place Bai Yu lived in was a one-bed, two-room home, about sixty square feet in size, and actually pretty clean. Once they stepped inside, Bai Yu went to the living room and started rummaging through his stuff, finally emerging with a cardboard box that contained a few books and some random other things which, judging by their covers, were all ancient writings.

"Fengjin…"

Wang Xiaomie started to call for Wen Fengjin, but the man had already picked up one of the items in the box and started flipping through it. As Wang Xiaomie rubbed his neck, Bai Yu just happened to turn his head, allowing him to catch a glimpse of something red on Wang Xiaomie’s overly pale nape—but he lost sight of it again in the blink of an eye.

Could he have imagined it? Bai Yu scratched his head in confusion.

Chapter 48:
My Perfect Skin

I *AM EVIL ITSELF. I am in the abyss.*

I never hid myself—until the one I loved was in the light.

And so, I drew a perfect picture, then used it to cover my face…

Within the enormous underground palace, upon that spacious platform, when I was nailed to that tree wreathed in peach blossoms—when I saw him come back to life and knock that human named Zhen Bei to the ground—I was happy. Shixiong didn't die. There was still a chance to redeem myself.

But when Shixiong said he remembered everything, I lowered my head. That human kept repeatedly urging Shixiong to leave me, leave the mausoleum…

Ah, I want…

The Wen Fengjin nailed to the pining tree was as listless as if his very soul had been sucked from him, leaving only a shell behind. The despair was all-encompassing, leaving him helpless as a weak animal frozen with fear and indecision, so much so that you couldn't bear to criticize him.

But in reality?

Wen Fengjin's overly soft and handsome face was hidden in the shadow of his lowered head, his enormous scarlet irises nearly filling his eyes. The bloodred orbs flickered slightly. His blue-gray skin, having lost its color, carried a foreboding scent of death. A look of twisted insanity gradually spread from his lips to the corners of his eyes.

Ah, I want…

Are you going to leave me? You can't. Did I give you permission to?

The crimson mark on his forehead burned darkly, and he gently bit down on his lip. The soft flesh of it split open between his teeth, and salty drops sprang from the wound.

I—oh—I want…

He twitched his hand. The wooden nail piercing through his palm sparked with intense, swollen, itchy pain at the movement.

I can pull myself free now, can't I? It should be about time to break away…

The perfectly drawn expression of deep love and sorrow on his face seemed to say: *I struggle with things I am hard-pressed to explain. I had no choice but to do what I did*. Yet inwardly, he was baring his fangs with ruthless bloodthirst, his gaze pinned on that person's back.

You want to leave me? That will lead to death… Not mine, but yours.

Shixiong—Shixiong—if you choose to leave with him, I'll kill you, tear your flesh to pieces, break your bones, and devour you, starting with your head, bit by bit, piece by piece…

We should be together. I started planning this from the moment you first left me. However much time I spent waiting for you…that's how much of you I'll eat, all right? If each day is one piece, each year three hundred sixty-five pieces, how many pieces make up a thousand years?

Every day in this mausoleum, I thought… I spent every day thinking, if one day Shixiong woke up but never fell under the control of my blood, and made a fuss about wanting to leave, what would I do?

Scarlet eyes rolled upward, sticking to his upper eyelids as he peeked to see how the man he loved would respond.

Pity? Humility? Putting everything aside to beg him to stay? Sure, Wen Fengjin could do that. He'd drawn a perfect skin to plaster over his face, which could look just like a demon's in the worst light, softly whispering, sincerely imploring, humbly gazing upward at his lover. He could cater to his lover with whatever was the most advantageous; whatever his lover liked, that would be the skin he donned. The moment the other softened, mercifully and lovingly dropping his guard, the demon would win. And with its victory would come imprisonment, fetters, and a vigorous act of possession!

Shixiong, I don't want to scare you, nor do I want to bring you pain. So could you move a little faster? Hurry and reject him, hurry and come to my side to embrace me, then tell me you'll never run away.

That face hidden in shadow was far too calm and cold. The smiling expression that stretched itself over his overly attractive features, covered in the blue-gray pallor of death, was a terrifying picture. The drawn-on, obscenely beautiful male face began to crack and peel, revealing the evil face of the demon beneath.

But he did not see the moment when it peeled in its entirety. His shixiong saw through that laughable man's clumsy lies, then walked over and saw his false skin.

"All right, that's enough of that. You can stop with the dead look. It's because I recovered my memories that I've managed to confirm one thing."

Wen Fengjin raised his head. His false skin wore an expression that suggested his heart had turned to ash.

Shixiong squatted down in front of him, chin propped on one hand. He placed the other hand against Wen Fengjin's cheek and broke out into a grin that let a single canine poke from beneath his lips, eyes curving with his smile.

"I confirmed that I've long since forgiven you. Whether it's my past self a thousand years ago, or the me that's here right now, I've always really liked you, Xiao-Wenzi. We'll still be together in the future too, and this time we'll never part again!"

And then came a tight embrace. The demon finally saw the moment in which his lover dropped his act…

Wen Fengjin rested his head against the neck of the person giving him this hug, frowning as if simultaneously saddened and overjoyed by the hard-earned feelings he'd regained. But beneath the surface…

…Bloodied lips slowly curved into a sickle smile, his long and thin scarlet eyes curving as they narrowed.

Ah… You can't escape now.

Shixiong said to spare the human who so disgusted him. Shixiong said they were going to the surface to live. Shixiong said…

And why not? Wen Fengjin gazed gently at Wang Xiaomie. "All right, whatever you say."

You can't escape my grasp.

When he was enveloped in that hug, Wen Fengjin knew he'd obtained the love he'd desired to the point of insanity. But there was no time to go wild with joy at his prayers being answered. He hurried to loop that reddened love around and around the sharp-thorned iron net with which he bound it.

He didn’t want anyone else to touch it! He didn’t want to let it escape! Even having other people catch a glimpse of it was enough to fill Wen Fengjin with disgust, as if someone else had licked his treasure.

They went to the surface, an entirely unfamiliar place. Even so, Wen Fengjin didn’t panic. Even if the world was changing, people’s hearts remained the same, as did the laws of greed and the strong devouring the weak. He possessed power that no mortal had; he possessed innumerable riches.

As he watched Shixiong become immersed in his own world that day, he didn’t immediately call him out on it. A dangerous thing would never attract anyone’s affection, even if it had yet to cause harm. So even if he was inwardly despondent, Wen Fengjin still waited for night to fall before speaking up.

Sure enough, Shixiong was so remorseful that he never ignored him again. He was jealous of all people and things that could draw Wang Xiaomie’s attention away, whether it was food or those strange electronic devices. Wen Fengjin liked those eyes, pure as ephemeral mist. He wanted those eyes to look at him every moment of every day, to see himself reflected within those pearly, glass-like orbs. He became inescapably engrossed by the sight.

The demon who’d had his first taste of love put on a meticulous act, appearing carelessly aloof on the surface, when in reality, he was quickly observing all the things his lover enjoyed. Wang Xiaomie liked it when he made the occasional embarrassed expression, liked seeing the blank look on his face after telling a joke or doing something funny.

He even wrote him some Good Guy Rules in a notebook.

That perfect skin he wore quickly learned to do everything expected of it.

After all, he'd lived in the darkest era of the Northern Kingdom. At the age of four, he'd been forced to watch as his father, mother, brothers, sisters, and the rest of his over two hundred relatives and servants were beheaded one after the other. He'd once been sent to the academy, where a bunch of children were instructed to laugh and call him "son of a brigand" over and over again, pressing down on his head in an attempt to shove it into the chamber pot.

Once he grew up, he was subject to rejection, abhorrence, disdain, and assassination attempts from countless people. Countless repulsively fluctuating faces lingered behind his back, hideously distorted by their greed for his power and wealth.

But pillaging and silencing, bestowing death and despair upon people, were things he did quite often, too. He sat right there in the abyss, indolently leaning his chin against a hand. He never needed anyone's pity, never needed any explanations, was openly and unscrupulously blackhearted to the core.

I am evil itself. I am in the abyss.

I never hid myself—until the one I loved was in the light.

And so, I drew a perfect picture, and used it to cover my face…

Chapter 49:
Is This Your Ring?

"THESE BOOKS AREN'T COMPLETE." Wen Fengjin picked up the old books and flipped through them one by one. Suddenly, his bony fingers paused, and a great change came over his expression—but he immediately covered it up. He held up the book to Bai Yu. "There are a few numbers on the final page of every book—that's the date and serial number. These books of yours should have thirty-one volumes, but there's only seventeen here."

"Huh? We're missing that many?" Bai Yu was shocked. He hurriedly picked up a book and flipped to the index pages to discover that it really did have a date and serial number written there. They were all written with special characters, and he'd always assumed they were the author's signature. "I honestly never realized."

"Didn't you figure out that everything written in these was about how various tools were made?" Wang Xiaomie asked Bai Yu.

The swarthy Da-Bai bared a mouthful of shiny teeth, saying with a surprising amount of pride, "I guessed it, of course!"

Wang Xiaomie was speechless. *It really is a miracle this child's survived to be as old as he is,* he silently thought.

He moved over to take a look. "Oh, right. Fengjin, since you can understand the writing…is there anything in there relating to those weapons?"

Wen Fengjin rolled up the book and softly bonked Wang Xiaomie's head as he peeked surreptitiously. "This one only lists a few materials for the crafting of such tools. The notes are written in a special script, as well. By the way, I noticed earlier that you kept rubbing at your neck." A big, chilly hand pinched at Wang Xiaomie's neck in much the same way you'd scruff a kitten, gently rubbing against each protruding joint. "Does it hurt here?"

"Whoa!" Wang Xiaomie let out a scream, reaching back to push Wen Fengjin's large hand away. "Aiya, don't pinch it, don't pinch it! For all we know, I just have a stiff neck from sleeping funny. Fuck! That one pinch practically killed me, it tingled so much!"

Wen Fengjin let go with a smile in his eyes, then put the book he was holding back into the box on the floor.

It was at this very moment that a loud *bang!* sounded from the living room window. A big bat-like thing was plastered against the window, staring at them with a somber look in its eyes.

"Fuck!"

"Fuck!"

Wang Xiaomie and Bai Yu both started in fright. Wang Xiaomie even let out a wail and leapt into Wen Fengjin's arms. Bai Yu wailed too, stretching out his arms and looking around for a moment, but after realizing that the pair over there had absolutely no interest in letting him play along, the panicked and aggrieved man squatted down and tightly hugged the box of books on the floor instead. *Wehhhh, protect me, Grandpa!*

Pitch-black clothes, greasy hair, dirty fingers, and a large face pressed themselves as hard as they could against the window—so hard their features

were deformed. The window being relatively small meant that the person pressed against it blocked out most of the light, making the living room they stood in grow dark.

The two cowardly puppies kept trembling for quite a while, but the person on the window watched them without moving a muscle, pitch-black eyes rolling like marbles. Wang Xiaomie chanced a look and discovered that not only was the stranger staring right at him, but a grin was slowly stretching itself across that greasy face…

"Oh my frickin' god!"

He was gulping with fear. Wen Fengjin held him tight in one arm, but when his dark eyes met those of the freak across from them, the freak cracked open his mouth in silent laughter. Wen Fengjin smiled as well after watching him for a while, but his smile was so cold it might have been packed in ice.

Wang Xiaomie kept casting surreptitious glances at the weirdo in the window as he quickly and hopefully said to Bai Yu, "Da-Bai, Da-Bai! This guy's not moving at all. Maybe he's one of your upstairs neighbors who accidentally fell."

Bai Yu was practically crying as he replied, "I'm on the top floor! I don't *have* any dang upstairs neighbors!"

Great. Wang Xiaomie started trembling even harder than before. "Do you think maybe he's a Spider-Man cosplayer…?"

"…Bro, I'll be honest here: I've seriously never seen anyone wear a Spider-Man cosplay that looked like this before…" Bai Yu trembled as he turned his head to look at the big bat behind him. When he saw the smile on that face, he started shaking like a secondhand washing machine, his entire body in vibration mode. "No, guys, t-t-t-take a look at what he's got in his hand. Why does it look so much like one of the books my grandpa left me?"

Wang Xiaomie turned his head to look. "It doesn't look *like* it."

Bai Yu let out a sigh. “Oh? That’s a relief…”

Wang Xiaomie put a palm to his face. “Like, my ass! It frickin’ *is*!”

The look on Bai Yu’s face immediately changed. He shot the man an angry glare as he cursed him out. “I was *wondering* why it felt like I was missing so many books! So it’s all because you stole them, you sonuvabitch bastard!”

The demonic-looking man in the window looked at him, and Bai Yu’s angry expression disappeared in an instant. With a bark of fear, he turned back around and resumed hugging his box and trembling like a coward. “Wehhh, he stole my books, and he’s being mean to me too!”

Struck silent, Wang Xiaomie couldn’t help the mental callout. *Could you have any less of a backbone?*

It was at this moment that Wen Fengjin moved. You had to admit that his Boss Wen was called Boss for a reason—this was a guy who’d raised a bunch of monsters and could still call them little cuties, after all. Without a hint of panic on his face or trembling in his fingers, he gently pushed Wang Xiaomie behind him, then stepped toward the window.

The freak’s mouth cracked even wider at Wen Fengjin’s approach. There was a provocative look in those pitch-black eyes as, in the next instant, he let go of the glass and fell out of view.

Wang Xiaomie and Bai Yu were stunned by his choice of action. *Oh my god! This is the frickin’ sixth floor!*

“Xiao-Wenzi!” Wang Xiaomie called out quietly from behind Wen Fengjin. As an aside, he couldn’t help noticing that Wen Fengjin’s figure was tall and slender when seen from behind, long silver hair curving slightly against his back.

“Everything’s fine. I’ll be right back.” Having said that, Wen Fengjin pushed open the window and jumped out of it.

Wang Xiaomie nervously ran to the window and looked down. Bai Yu didn’t appear to be particularly well-off, so the home he was renting was located in the oldest and most run-down part of the city. Countless buildings of uneven heights and peeling paint huddled together, with narrow little alleys and piles of garbage everywhere you looked. The freak quickly and nimbly wove across the roofs of several low buildings much like a ninja in a cartoon, while Wen Fengjin followed close behind. It wasn’t long before they both slipped into an alley and disappeared.

Bai Yu joined Wang Xiaomie in looking down, saying as he did, “Dude, these guys can fly! What do we do now?”

“There’s nothing we *can* do, besides wait.” Wang Xiaomie sighed, frowning worriedly, then tilted his head. His neck was starting to feel uncomfortable again.

Within the complex maze of dirty little alleyways, a leaping figure suddenly froze in midair. It fell from a great height, as if controlled by something, and crashed loudly into a pile of trash bags.

The fallen figure nimbly got back up again, now filthy, but apparently unable to feel pain as he leaned into a corner and looked at the sky above.

A few seconds later, Wen Fengjin leapt down as well, eyes narrowed. “Go on, keep running—or have you had enough? Give me the book, and tell me where the one who told you to steal them is.”

A gurgling laugh spilled from the cracked-open mouth of the man in the corner. He looked human, but everything about him was uncanny in one way or another.

Wen Fengjin noticed this. His brow furrowed and then relaxed again. “It seems there’s no point trying to talk to you—you’re just a shoddily made, low-grade thing, after all.”

And then, he suddenly vanished. The other man immediately assumed a defensive position as something invisible violently smashed against his raised arms. It did not sound like the heavy noise of something hitting a human body, but more like something beating against a wooden object.

The two quickly started exchanging blows. Wen Fengjin’s attacks hit fast and hard, each individual strike strong enough to smash an average tree. But his opponent made a sudden grab with both hands, proving unexpectedly capable of fending off such powerful attacks. Even so, his body was beginning to lose the dexterity it had had earlier. Ten fingers shot savagely forth, and Wen Fengjin twisted his waist to dodge them as he swept out a leg to ruthlessly send his opponent flying into the wall. A loud, chaotic crash resounded from the miscellaneous objects piled there.

The man, trying to pull himself up out of the mess, found Wen Fengjin pressing a hand down on his head. Sharp nails aimed with perfect precision at Wen Fengjin’s thigh, but before he could act, a crisp noise, like snapping wood, resounded through the air.

The headless body crashed motionlessly to the ground. Wen Fengjin, his smile not reaching his eyes, lifted the head he’d torn off to eye level. When their eyes met, the head was *still grinning*. Meanwhile, the now-headless body had not shed a single drop of blood. A bunch of hay had even spilled from it.

Crushing the manufactured wooden head in his grip, Wen Fengjin shook the fragments off his hand onto the ground, then bent down to retrieve the book from the motionless body. He straightened back up and flipped through the book. The next instant, the pupils of his dark eyes shrank to a pinpoint.

The book was blank. This was a trap—nobody had stolen anything. Those books had already disappeared a long time ago.

"Xiaomie—" Wen Fengjin's hands instantly curled into fists, long and narrowed eyes misting over with a bloody red, as he quickly turned and ran back the way he'd come.

After watching Wen Fengjin leap out, Wang Xiaomie sat down on a chair in the living room and rubbed at his head. Bai Yu, cleaning up the box on the floor, noticed he was feeling uncomfortable. "You wait right there. I'll go get a couple bottles of cold beer from the fridge and you can put them against your neck—it might help a little."

"Sure, thank you."

"No need to be polite."

Bai Yu chuckled as he slipped into the kitchen and started rummaging through the fridge.

At this moment, someone conveniently knocked on the door. Bai Yu was about to answer it, only for Wang Xiaomie to wave a hand at him, saying, "You keep going. I'll get the door. For all we know, Wen Fengjin's come back."

"Oh, okay." Thinking that the only people who would knock on his door would either be guys here for water and electricity fees, or his landlord, Bai Yu squatted back down and went back to rummaging.

Wang Xiaomie stood up from his chair and walked over to open the door. On the other side stood a woman, shaking her lowered head. She wore glossy purple ice-silk pajamas and, seemingly, no underclothes. Wang Xiaomie quickly lifted his head, not daring to look anywhere other than her face. “Er, did you need something, miss?”

“Ring…” The woman was swaying like she’d had too much to drink. She muttered this one word, then raised her left hand to show the back of it to Wang Xiaomie, saying, “On here…ring…has Bai carved on it… Wondered if…it’s yours.”

Wang Xiaomie saw that she was indeed wearing a ring on her hand. He called out toward the kitchen, “Da-Baaaii! There’s a woman here wearing a gold ring with Bai carved on it. She’s asking if it’s yours!”

Bai Yu let out a loud laugh from his spot by the fridge, “Ha ha! I’m so poor I’m close to eating dirt. Where would I get a gold ring? And one with Bai carved on—*oh fuck*! What?!” He immediately paled. “Get away from her, now!”

“What?” Wang Xiaomie had only just turned his head when the woman at the door suddenly charged in like a madwoman, sending him flying. “Ah!”

He put a hand to the back of his head, nearly crying from the pain. He was just about to get back up when the madwoman grabbed a pillow from the sofa and was on him, pressing it firmly against his face.

“This is what you get for giving me the cold shoulder! This is what you get for not returning my texts! Ha ha ha ha! I’ll kill you! Oh yes, I’m gonna kill you! Ha ha ha ha—”

The woman was Li Manman—the same person who'd picked up the ring earlier that day. Now, she wore near-translucent purple pajamas and sat on the still-prone Wang Xiaomie's stomach, a hideous smile on her face as she pressed the long cushion to his face with extraordinary, steellike strength in an attempt to suffocate him to death.

His field of vision went totally dark, and he found himself unable to breathe. The rough burlap fabric rubbed against his face in a way that seriously hurt. Human instinct led the panicked Wang Xiaomie to start tearing wildly at the woman sitting atop him, no longer caring that his opponent was a girl—survival came first!

Bai Yu frantically rushed out to stand behind her, but seeing her pajamas, he seriously didn't know where he was supposed to put his hands. *Forget it!* He gritted his teeth, squeezed his eyes shut, and threaded his arms under her armpits from behind to pull her back.

Who would have thought such a fragile-looking woman would be so completely immovable, no matter how much he tugged? Bai Yu truly used every bit of strength he had, but it did nothing to change the fact that Wang Xiaomie—pressed against the floor by this woman and smothered with a couch cushion—had stopped moving…

Bai Yu's eyes widened in shock as he fell back onto the floor. *Oh no, he's stopped moving… It's over, it's all over…*

Just as he was thinking this, the originally unmoving Wang Xiaomie suddenly grabbed hold of Bai Yu's ankle.

"Waaaah!"

"The heck are you screaming for?!"

Wang Xiaomie quickly and forcefully bent his knees, throwing the madwoman off himself in one swift movement, then got up and turned to watch her with a wary eye.

Seeing him alive, Bai Yu rushed to him, overjoyed, and yelled, “Fuck, you’re amazing! You’re fine even after all that? A normal person would probably have suffocated to death by now!”

Yeah, a normal person should have been long dead by now. However…

Wang Xiaomie, after getting suffocated and struggling for a good long while, had suddenly remembered something. He was a goshdarned zongzi! Jiangshi didn’t heckin’ need to breathe!

I must’ve gotten water in my braincase while washing my face today, Wang Xiaomie thought, as the woman across from him yelled once more. “I’ll kill you!”

She came charging at him with a roar.

Wang Xiaomie and Bai Yu both thought, *Fuck! She’s still at it!*

Chapter 50:
An Angry Breast Can’t Be Suppressed

AS THEY WATCHED the madwoman charge toward them, Wang Xiaomie and Bai Yu looked like they were playing a game of eagle and chicken, with Bai Yu standing behind Wang Xiaomie and screaming as he clung to his clothes. Up in front, Wang Xiaomie pulled up memories of what little martial arts he’d learned in his past life, using his somewhat greater-than-human strength to agitatedly push the woman away over and over again.

But the woman was like a robot, incapable of exhaustion. Every time she was pushed away, she’d charge right back in with a weird laugh.

After this had been going on a while, Wang Xiaomie found himself starting to get worn out, not helped by the fact that Bai Yu was still yelling behind him. He turned around angrily to knock him on the head, saying, “What the heck are you yelling for?! You’re going to tear my clothes if you pull that hard! Come help me out!”

“I can’t, I can’t! That’s a *girl*!” Bai Yu exclaimed, frowning. “How am I supposed to lay my hands on a delicate girl?”

Wang Xiaomie said, “I’m still a frickin’ *man* here! Open those dang eyes of yours—does she seem like your average girl? Do girls normally bare their teeth and yell ‘I’m going to kill you’?! Do they?! Do the girls in your family chase people around waving kitchen knives?!”

Hm? Wait—*kitchen knives*?!

Wang Xiaomie and Bai Yu gazed dumbstruck at the madwoman across from them. The woman, her head hung low and her long hair a wild mess, had at some point unbeknownst to them managed to pick up a cleaver from the kitchen. Now, she was chuckling like a psychotic murderer as she stared at them.

They were both struck speechless.

Wang Xiaomie said: “Is this what you’d call a delicate girl? This is called a yandere, and of the sort that chopped up Makoto-ge, too.”

Bai Yu said, “…Forget it. Pretend I never said anything.”

“I’ll kill you—heh heh heh—it’s all your faaaauult—” As they finished questioning their lives, the so-called delicate girl across from them lifted her glittering cleaver, which still had bits of chopped green onion stuck to it, and came swinging it toward them.

“Fuck!” With no way to block an attack like this, Wang Xiaomie and Bai Yu beat a quick retreat, running to the tea table in the living room. The cleaver-wielding madwoman stayed right on their heels in pursuit, waving her weapon the entire time.

The three of them ran in circles around the tea table. The cleaver nearly sliced off Bai Yu’s asscheeks a good few times! Bai Yu, sensing the chill behind, released a whirlwind of tears as he ran. He yelled to Wang Xiaomie, who was in front of him, “Run a little faster, Dage! She’s gonna chop my ass off! Aiyo, my pants!”

As he shouted, the cleaver sliced open a huge hole in the back of his loose-fitting pants, baring his flowery underpants to the world. The madwoman behind him laughed creepily, like a dirty hooligan ripping off a maiden’s clothes.

Wang Xiaomie turned for a quick look and couldn't stop himself from laughing at the sight. But this short pause almost allowed the woman to catch up with Bai Yu.

"Don't stop! Aaaaaahh!" Bai Yu paled as the cleaver fell toward him in one swift motion. The demonic sound of the woman's victorious laughter filled his ears.

In the blink of an eye, Wang Xiaomie instantly stopped, turned, and sent Bai Yu flying with a kick. He put so much strength into it that Bai Yu was sent smashing into the sofa, successfully evading the madwoman's cleaver.

Having just barely escaped the jaws of death, Bai Yu rubbed his shoulder, sore after the kick. Lingering fear made him roll off the sofa and duck for cover before he let out a sigh of relief with a hand against his chest. "Dear gods in heaven, I'm bound for good fortune after surviving great disaster. I'm bound for good fortune after surviving great disaster…"

Meanwhile, Wang Xiaomie's mind was moving at lightspeed. As he recalled the little bit of swordplay he'd learned in his past life, his face darkened. He seized a long and narrow object off the tea table, assuming a dashing swordsman's stance as he aimed at the woman.

The madwoman was thrown off by this, gripping her cleaver as she stared at the…backscratcher currently pointed at her.

Wang Xiaomie narrowed his eyes, fixing his stance as he met the madwoman's gaze, while Bai Yu—looking at the backscratcher in Wang Xiaomie's hand—went momentarily silent.

Wang Xiaomie seemed calm as a seasoned vet on the outside, while panicking like crazy on the inside. "Don't come any closer! Or else I'll give

you a taste of my Xuanfeng Sword Style!”

He was gambling on the possibility that the woman was crazy enough not to recognize the backscratcher in his hand.

The madwoman stopped just as predicted, but before Wang Xiaomie could sigh in relief, he heard her click her tongue.

Wang Xiaomie froze.

Bai Yu tutted. “Oho.”

Oh, come on, lady, you’re already off your rocker. What’re you mocking me for?!

The calm and composed look on Wang Xiaomie’s face instantly disappeared like smoke as he wailed, turned around, and started running. The madwoman continued to cackle wildly while she brandished her cleaver at his back.

Bai Yu, hiding behind the sofa, chose this moment to yell, “Pull off her ring! That ring was a tool my grandpa made—it draws out the wearer’s darkest, most hateful and resentful thoughts, and makes them go berserk! If you pull it off, she’ll come back to her senses!”

“God, you should’ve said so earlier!” Wang Xiaomie cried out as he ran for his life, loudly cursing in anger.

Bai Yu, who knew he was in the wrong here, shrank back in response. “My mind was a total blank while I was getting chased… There’s no way I’d remember that while running for my life.”

I seriously can’t with you! Wang Xiaomie couldn’t be bothered to continue this conversation, instead yelling to the woman behind him, “Calm

down, miss, please! If you have any grudges, just tell us about them! We'll shoulder the burden for you!"

He'd really hoped to stall for time with this, but to his surprise, the woman behind him actually stopped in her tracks. Wang Xiaomie, seeing a hint of hope, shared a tiny look of joy with Bai Yu as he stopped and panted for breath. Not daring to provoke her, he mustered the most heartfelt and gentle tone he'd ever used in this lifetime to encourage her, saying, "Yes… Just like this. You talk, and we'll make sure to listen. Whether you're lacking money or a boyfriend, we'll make sure to resolve the issue for you."

Bai Yu grumbled from behind the sofa. "I don't have any money, and I don't have any single guy friends either…"

Wang Xiaomie snapped, "You shut up! *I* have money! Besides, aren't you still single yourself?!"

When he said that, Bai Yu actually turned bashful, saying, "Oh no, I prefer to grow a relationship over time, and this is only our first time meeting."

…*Would you believe me if I said I was going to beat you to death with this backscratcher?*

The woman, meanwhile, was stunned for quite a while before quietly murmuring, "Grudges?"

Wang Xiaomie and Bai Yu spoke together. "Yeah, that's right. What's there for you to get depressed over? Just look at how pretty you are."

The cleaver-wielding woman suddenly raised her head, pupils widening and face twisting as she yelled, "So what if I've got a flat chest! I can't believe he'd dump me! I can't believe he won't return my texts! *I'll kill yoooouu!*"

They were struck speechless. Wang Xiaomie looked at Bai Yu. “Didn’t you say it was the darkest, most hateful resentment? A flat chest? How the fuck does a flat chest qualify?!”

Bai Yu had nothing to say to that. *I’m real surprised too here, bro.*

A woman barging into her neighbor’s apartment in broad daylight and chasing after a pair of innocent young men with a kitchen knife because her boyfriend thinks she has a flat chest? Is this reasonable at all? Huh?! And besides… Wang Xiaomie cast a glance at the woman’s sticklike figure, which could be seen through the purple ice-silk pajamas. *I didn’t notice earlier, but she really is pretty flat…*

The madwoman—catching the complicated look on Wang Xiaomie’s face—became even more frenzied than before, flame and lightning almost seeming to flash from the cleaver’s blade as she brandished it. At this point, Wang Xiaomie truly couldn’t run any more. So he raised his backscratcher according to the sword style he’d learned in his past life, and engaged the woman in combat.

But he was only wielding a backscratcher, after all, which meant he could only retreat as he fought, rather than taking any blows directly, knocking the cleaver away with techniques designed to deflect the strength of her attacks.

“I’ll kill you kill you kill you *kill yoouuu*!”

If this were an anime, Wang Xiaomie would be covered in sweat drops right now. *All right, all right, I get it already! Are you a parrot, lady?!*

Bai Yu, growing anxious at seeing Wang Xiaomie on the back foot, stood up to search for a weapon of his own, loudly yelling as he did so in an

attempt to placate the woman. “Don’t get excited, miss! He’s an innocent gay! His boyfriend doesn’t have boobs either!”

This got Wang Xiaomie annoyed. “Bullshit,” he shot back. “Don’t judge my Xiao-Wenzi just by his pretty face! He looks skinny with clothes on, but he’s full-bodied without, and that figure—eight-pack muscles and an Adonis belt! Even his pecs are fuller than what she’s got!”

At this, the woman started screaming, waving her cleaver with even more ferocity than before.

Bai Yu paused in the middle of picking up a badminton racket, saying, “Bro! Can’t you compromise for her sake at a time like this?!”

A good chunk of the backscratcher was hacked off by the cleaver as Wang Xiaomie used it to poke hard at a pressure point on the woman’s shoulder, causing her entire arm to go limp. The cleaver fell to the floor with a clang.

Having finally gained some space to breathe, Wang Xiaomie said with great righteousness, “Absolutely not! My hubby is the best!”

Bai Yu was stunned silent.

Relieved of her weapon, the woman raised her other arm with the intent to start close-quarters combat, long manicured nails flashing in the light of the sun as though she were using the Jiu Yin White Bone Claw!

Wang Xiaomie couldn’t truly injure her either, and so he kept grappling with her, even getting slammed hard against the floor. As the two of them rolled back and forth on the ground, the woman’s pajamas rode up, while Wang Xiaomie’s long ponytail was about to come loose as well.

Bai Yu stood to the side, wielding a badminton racket, and gaped at the sight. “Fuck, this is exciting.”

Wang Xiaomie braced his elbow against the woman's neck to hold her off as she opened and closed her mouth with audible clicks in an attempt to bite him. She was all but drooling on his face! "Exciting, my ass! Come help me out!"

"Huh? Oh right, coming!"

Bai Yu hurriedly grabbed a jump rope off the shoe cabinet and rushed over to loop it around the woman. Working together, they finally managed to mostly tie her up, but before they could rejoice, she leapt up like a grounded carp and bit into Bai Yu's arm as he was in the middle of knotting the rope.

"Owowow—that hurts!" Bai Yu shrieked.

"Don't worry, I'll help you!" Wang Xiaomie pried her mouth off with his hands. Eyes bulging with anger, the madwoman was still trying to bite, so Wang Xiaomie picked a random object off the floor and shoved it into her mouth. The pop-top can was loudly crunched flat, the beer inside it bubbling out to pour into the woman's mouth.

Bai Yu took advantage of this moment to grab hold of the woman's hand and pull off the golden ring. Once it was removed, she writhed around for a bit longer, then lost consciousness.

Wang Xiaomie and Bai Yu were exhausted beyond belief. They shared a look before falling back on their butts and panting like their lives depended on it.

"She's okay, right…?" Wang Xiaomie asked as he wiped at his face.

Bai Yu shook his head, saying, "It's fine. She's probably just wiped out."

Wang Xiaomie said, “You’ve gotta put these sorts of things away properly. If there were a couple more rings like this, we’d be dead meat!”

Bai Yu innocently shook his head. “No, I put the ring and everything else Grandpa left behind in a big box and hid it in the wardrobe in the living room. I’ve got no idea how it ended up in her hands. It’s really weird…”

Wang Xiaomie couldn’t figure it out, either. The pair puzzled over it for a while before helping the woman off the floor and placing her on the sofa instead. This scene would’ve been ripe for misinterpretation otherwise: a woman in thin pajamas tied up on the floor and force-fed a mouthful of alcohol, while a pair of grown men sat nearby panting for breath. If a neighbor came by and knocked on the door right now, they could have fifteen mouths each and still be unable to explain themselves.

But that was strange, too. They’d made such a loud ruckus, and yet not a single neighbor had come knocking on the door. A curious Wang Xiaomie brought this up in a question to Bai Yu.

Bai Yu waved a hand dismissively. “A lot of the apartments in this building are empty. There’s some old folks on the first and second floor, but with their hearing, you could have a disco up here and they wouldn’t know it.”

The two of them caught their breath. The living room, kitchen, and both men themselves were a total mess. It was at this moment that another knock sounded at the door.

Wang Xiaomie and Bai Yu were stunned. “No way! There’s more?!”

But this time, there was only a single knock before the door was kicked open with a loud crash, and a silver-haired, red-eyed Wen Fengjin came charging in to pull Wang Xiaomie up and into his embrace. His sharp,

inhuman eyes swept over the area around them before locking onto the unconscious woman on the sofa and the still very ragged-looking Bai Yu.

Bai Yu, frightened by his gaze, immediately raised his hands in surrender. The vicious aura in Wen Fengjin's eyes dissipated quite a bit, then, and he lowered his head, reaching a hand into Wang Xiaomie's loose clothing to slowly probe around. "Are you hurt?"

"No."

Wang Xiaomie leaned into Wen Fengjin's chest, his feelings of anxiety calming a lot at the feeling of those solid pecs.

But humans always tended to turn naughty as soon as they relaxed—he looked at Bai Yu, then patted his Xiao-Wenzi with a hand, as though saying, *See this? He's got the goods!*

Bai Yu was speechless.

Wang Xiaomie nuzzled energetically against Wen Fengjin's bosom. Wen Fengjin, thinking he'd suffered a fright, frowned and placed a gentle kiss on the top of Wang Xiaomie's head, rubbing his back with one hand.

Wang Xiaomie smirked. *See this? This is real boyfriend material!*

Bai Yu was silent. In his head was only one thought: *Phooey!*

Chapter 51:
Adopting Da-Bai

"WHAT'S GOING ON HERE?" Wen Fengjin looked at the woman as he asked this.

Wang Xiaomie gave him a quick summary of the situation with the ring and the woman. "This lady should be an ordinary human. The problem is that ring Da-Bai's grandpa left him." He sighed. "Da-Bai, enough hiding. Pull out that toy so we can take a look."

"What are you calling a toy…?" Bai Yu scratched his head, still somewhat afraid of Wen Fengjin. He stuck out his arm to reveal the ring lying in his palm. "Here, this is it."

It was a plain golden band with a faint "Bai" carved into it, emanating a modest glow from where it lay in Da-Bai's palm.

Pinching the ring between sharp, bony fingers, Wen Fengjin held it up to eye level and calmly inspected it. Wang Xiaomie slipped from his arms to place a thin throw blanket over the girl on the couch. She was in her pajamas, after all, and the rest of them were all men, so it'd be bad to leave her like this.

Da-Bai watched Wen Fengjin as he inspected the ring, saying, "I know I hid that ring properly. I honestly have no idea how this girl got it. Also, I've seen her before—she's the renter who lives across from me."

"If she lives across from you then how'd you only just recognize her?" Wang Xiaomie turned to glare at him.

Bai Yu was also somewhat flabbergasted. “She’s usually got heavy makeup on. Without all that, she’s practically a different person. If it weren’t for the fact she’s got a mole on her face I wouldn’t have recognized her for anything!”

Wang Xiaomie was silent. This must be why people often advocated makeup-free faces: A bottle of makeup remover could turn your wife into an entirely different person.

He rubbed his neck as he stood up, saying, “Still, this was pretty bad luck on our part, considering she tried to chop *us* up instead of her boyfriend after putting on that ring—it’s not like we’re the ones who dumped her. That ring of yours…I don’t suppose she secretly took it?”

He’d been a renter himself, and the complex he’d lived in hadn’t had a property management company, so theft was common. His own home had been robbed before, too. It took a lot of attempts before the police finally managed to catch the culprit, only to discover that it was a neighbor all along. There was no way to tell what a stranger might really be thinking from the outside. Having lived a good many years now, Wang Xiaomie was no innocent damsel. He understood this well.

“I can’t say for sure—”

Wen Fengjin interrupted Da-Bai. “It wasn’t this woman. It was most likely someone purposely pulling strings in the shadows. The one I was chasing was a puppet, not a real person, and the book he was carrying was fake as well.”

He tossed the ring at Da-Bai, who scrambled to catch it before carefully wrapping it in tissues.

Wen Fengjin was expressionless, his gaze cold as he continued, “Your home has already become a place often visited by others. Those books and remaining tools have all been discovered.”

Da-Bai’s face froze up at this, eyes wide as he gazed around the living room. “Really? No way—the lock on my door is brand-new. Plus, whenever I come home, I always make sure to check for any marks on the floor. I even got a little stick with a notch on it to attach to the doorway.”

These were all common anti-burglary measures, the kind you could easily learn from the internet. But an average burglar wouldn’t notice such precautions, and anyone who didn’t understand Bai Yu would never guess that this dark-skinned fool of a young man could have the smarts to do such a thing.

Wang Xiaomie thought for a moment. “If it doesn’t seem to be a stranger committing the crime, then could it be someone you know?”

“I’m the only one left in my family. After Dad and Grandpa disappeared, not a single one of my relatives ever contacted me. I wouldn’t need to avoid ’em even if I wanted to.” After all, an orphaned teenage boy would be at the exact age where he started to be expensive to raise, needing to go to school and eat three meals a day. Your average relative would have no interest in taking on the additional trouble.

Talking about this was probably a sore spot for Bai Yu, who started cleaning up the living room in an attempt to hide his feelings. Wang Xiaomie wanted to comfort him, but wasn’t sure how to broach the subject. He’d also had his parents divorce at an early age, and they’d wanted nothing more than to strangle him to death to spare themselves the burden. And his grandmother had passed away just a few years after taking him in.

When he thought of it that way, his and Da-Bai's sad backgrounds were really quite similar.

Wen Fengjin was even less capable of comforting Bai Yu. It was hard to say he truly cared about anyone aside from Wang Xiaomie. Besides, Xiao-Wenzi had long since become a Big Boss type who'd kill people regardless of whether they offended him or not. It was entirely possible that an outsider's tragic weakness would only elicit a derisive laugh from him. He had been just a small child himself when he personally watched his parents and the rest of his entire family get beheaded, with not even a single animal spared, so he was far worse off than Wang Xiaomie and Bai Yu…

Wang Xiaomie fell silent at this thought. *Fuck, what are we? The Misfortune Trio?!*

"Maybe your grandpa or dad came back," was all he could think of to say.

Bai Yu's hands froze for a moment, and he quietly mumbled, "If only." He then silently continued cleaning up.

Wang Xiaomie didn't say any more on the subject, instead asking Wen Fengjin, "Fengjin, what did you mean when you mentioned a puppet earlier? You mean that man?"

"Mm," was Wen Fengjin's response. His long, narrow eyes paused as they swept over the bird's nest that was Wang Xiaomie's hair, shapely brows rising high. He walked over to undo Wang Xiaomie's hair tie, slowly finger-combing out the hairstyle he had mussed while rolling around on the floor. There was an unconcerned tone to his voice as he said, "That man was nothing more than a defective tool created by someone. Not a living person."

This statement not only shocked Wang Xiaomie, but made Bai Yu lift his head as well. He even forgot to put away the things in his hands. “That wasn’t a real person?!”

The man they’d seen in the window earlier could laugh and make various facial expressions. His skin and features had all looked exactly like a real person’s. Could something like that really be called a defective product?

“I-i-if…if he wasn’t a living person, then how was he made? Was he a replicant or something?” Bai Yu asked in a daze.

“No.” Wen Fengjin didn’t know what a replicant was. He took a moment to give a short explanation. “Its body was filled with hay. It’s a sort of refined tool. They were quite common long ago. Artisans would make many wooden puppets to help gather the materials they needed to craft, so you could say they were a relatively convenient implement.”

Bai Yu thought, *Gods, crafters of tools can even make things like* that*?!*

Wang Xiaomie, on the other hand, thought, *So errand boys existed even way back when? Wait, something’s not right here!* He asked Wen Fengjin, “How did you know that wooden puppet had hay in it?”

Da-Bai looked over at him as well. *That’s right! How did he know?*

Wen Fengjin, focused on the black hair in his hands, said indifferently, “I saw it when I twisted its head off.”

Wang Xiaomie and Da-Bai were both rendered speechless. They looked at each other in a wordless exchange, Da-Bai thinking, *I’ve never been this afraid of anyone in my life. Your husband’s absolutely the first!*

Wang Xiaomie nodded very seriously. *I feel the same way.*

Da-Bai had nothing to say to that.

By the time Bai Yu finished tidying up, Wen Fengjin had also finished fixing Wang Xiaomie's hair and clothes. The three of them then looked at the passed-out woman on the sofa.

"What're we supposed to do about this girl?" Wang Xiaomie worriedly asked. If it was a bad guy, they'd have eliminated her, but right now it was obvious that she was just an extremely unfortunate passerby.

Bai Yu was worried as well. "Ai, the main issue here is that she still hasn't woken up."

Wen Fengjin said, "How inconvenient. Let's just bury her."

Bai Yu was stunned silent.

Wang Xiaomie said: "…Please just shut your mouth. I'm begging you." The first thing he said was already enough to make one want to call the police.

Wen Fengjin didn't say another word. As the two normal people in the room, Wang Xiaomie and Bai Yu conferred for a good while before agreeing to call an ambulance and have the girl sent to the hospital. After all, they were directly involved with her ending up like this.

The pair immediately called an ambulance together. But they couldn't just let the rescue workers come upstairs, as this would arouse far too much suspicion. So they decided to take her downstairs to wait.

Of course, Boss Wen was already showing great restraint by not tossing her out the window, so there was no way they would expect him to carry her on his back. *That* would never happen in any of their lifetimes… though he would consider carrying Wang Xiaomie.

Since Boss Wen wasn’t going to carry her, and he wouldn’t let Wang Xiaomie touch that woman either, it fell to poor Da-Bai to piggyback her down six flights of stairs on a hot, sunny day. No matter how skinny she was, she was still a full-grown adult. Once they reached street level, Bai Yu collapsed onto the ground, unable to even speak as he lay there gasping for breath.

An apologetic Wang Xiaomie ran over to a small shop he’d caught sight of earlier and bought a good many ice-cold drinks for Bai Yu. “You’ve worked hard. All three of us have had a long day, so I’ll make lamb chops tonight as a reward for you guys.”

His words were directed at Bai Yu, but he was casting furtive glances at Wen Fengjin. What he’d just said was his way of probing him. Bai Yu’s place was clearly unsafe, and Bai Yu’s sorry past felt all too familiar. The compassionate Wang Xiaomie wanted to take him in temporarily, but he was afraid that Wen Fengjin would be against it.

But there wasn’t the slightest change to Wen Fengjin’s expression upon his saying this—instead, it was Bai Yu who waved his hands repeatedly and said there was no need. Maybe he didn’t get the hint…

Wang Xiaomie tugged Wen Fengjin over to the side, quietly whispering, “Fengjin, I was thinking…we could keep Bai Yu for a while. He clearly can’t keep living in his own home anymore. The look on that puppet’s face was absolutely not friendly, and he looks to be hard up on money too, so I think…”

“All right.”

“I think he probably doesn’t have…hm?! What did you say just now?” Wang Xiaomie stopped talking to stare at him in wide-eyed shock.

Wen Fengjin had agreed far too easily—so much so that he was starting to wonder if the man in front of him had been possessed by something.

"I said all right. He can bring those things of his over. However…" Wen Fengjin's handsome face betrayed no visible emotion as he continued, "Those things must be put into my care for the time being."

Wang Xiaomie was dumbstruck. "You want his things?"

All he got was denial from Wen Fengjin. "I have no use for his things, but that's clearly what those people are after—leaving them in his hands will only bring trouble."

"So that's how it is…" Wang Xiaomie didn't doubt Wen Fengjin's words. The two of them could neither age nor die, so what object out there could ever move Wen Fengjin? He nodded, saying, "Give me a moment to discuss it with Bai Yu—those books were left for him by his grandfather, after all."

Wen Fengjin replied with a noncommittal grunt.

Wang Xiaomie turned around to explain the situation to Bai Yu, but Bai Yu couldn't bring himself to inconvenience them by moving into their home, and continuously shook his head.

"What's there to be embarrassed about? You already know us." Wang Xiaomie pointed at himself and Wen Fengjin, saying with a smile, "Neither of us is a real human being, so it'll be fine as long as you're not afraid—although Fengjin says that for safety's sake, you should consider letting him temporarily take care of those things for you. You can take them back whenever you want to, though. What happened just now was absolutely nothing good. I'm pretty sure someone did it all on purpose… And who knows what'll happen if you're alone."

Wang Xiaomie stopped here, knowing it was sometimes wise to not push too far. Good intentions were one thing, but you also had to consider whether the person in question actually needed your help or not.

Bai Yu was so dark-skinned that Wang Xiaomie honestly couldn't tell what sort of face he was making. He sat quietly with him for a while before suddenly saying, "Thank you, guys. I'll be imposing on you in the future… I'll try to find a suitable house as soon as I can, and I'll pay you monthly rent, too!"

"Don't. Money is the thing I need the least right now."

Da-Bai laughed as well, jokingly shooting him a jealous glare. Wen Fengjin watched from where he stood in the building's entryway behind them, his long, narrow, oddly colored eyes looking like a deep and quiet night.

Once the ambulance arrived, they followed the girl to the hospital, claiming they found her passed out at the building's entrance. The doctors showed no suspicion of the three men having done anything. After all, putting aside the black-skinned young lad, the long-haired couple was far more attractive than the woman on the stretcher! Even if one of them had white hair and quite terrifying eyes, the doctors didn't think too much of it —the youth these days were always messing around with false hair and cosmetic contacts. They'd seen quite a lot of this sort of thing!

After Wang Xiaomie paid for all her hospital expenses and left his phone number, the three of them took a cab back to Bai Yu's rental apartment and packed up his things.

It was afternoon by the time they got a ride back to the villa. Upon getting home, Wang Xiaomie found a guest room on the first floor for Bai

Yu and left him to get his things set up.

He turned around just in time to see Wen Fengjin already carrying Bai Yu's box of books upstairs. Probably in a rush to get changed—he knew that Wen Fengjin put quite a lot of stock in cleanliness, after all. Smiling, Wang Xiaomie went to rummage through the fridge and start making dinner.

After making a pot of spinach ball soup, a couple of side dishes, and quite a lot of lamb chops, Wang Xiaomie stopped to think for a moment, then pulled out some fast-freeze dumplings and cooked up a bowl just for Bai Yu. In the past, he remembered seeing other parents making dumplings whenever their children came home from abroad. He didn't know where Bai Yu was from, or whether they had this tradition there, but he made a bowl anyway.

When they sat down to dinner that night, the sumptuous spread before them emanated a rich fragrance. The enticing color of the lamb chops and delicious side dishes whetted the appetite. But Bai Yu was stupefied when he saw the extra bowl of boiled dumplings in front of him.

"Eat up."

Wang Xiaomie and Wen Fengjin had already started eating before Bai Yu finally picked up that bowl of dumplings and carefully took a sip of dumpling soup. In contrast with his dark skin, his bright eyes gradually began to redden, brimming over with a layer of watery mist.

Wang Xiaomie saw this but didn't say anything. He'd been just like Bai Yu back then, longingly inhaling the aroma of food that wafted from neighboring homes, his ears filled with the lively sound of other people's merry laughter…

But now he finally had a companion of his own. Wang Xiaomie watched as a pair of chopsticks reached out to place a piece of meat in his bowl. With a smile, he looked over at Wen Fengjin, and gave him a piece as well.

This was nice. He thought to himself, *How nice it would be if things could stay like this forever.*

After dinner, Bai Yu took over the dishwashing without a word. The three of them had some fruit after their meal, then watched some TV, after which Bai Yu and Wang Xiaomie both said good night.

Standing in the bathroom after having just finished his bath, a sopping wet Wang Xiaomie lifted up his hair. As he moved in front of the mirror to start drying off, he suddenly froze in his tracks. His pupils narrowed to pinpricks as he stared at the thing that began at his chest and splashed all the way up across his shoulders in a wild swath.

Wang Xiaomie stared at himself in the mirror and quietly muttered to himself. “Oh my god…what the heck is this?!”

Chapter 52:
I’m Gonna Hatch Eggs— Just You Wait and See!

T*HUMP THUMP thump!*

Thump thump thump!

The sound of running quickly grew nearer. Wen Fengjin—already in pajamas and about to lie down in his casket—frowned as he turned to look at the door.

An instant later the door was abruptly thrown open, and a naked, wet, pale little figure barged into Wen Fengjin’s field of vision. That pale little figure was wide-eyed, hair messily sticking to his body, and entirely seized with panic and fear as he yelled, “Xiao-Wenzi! I grew hair!”

Wen Fengjin was silent for a moment, his deep, narrow eyes slowly lowering from those pink little fruits to scan a dewy, naked lower belly and the hollow of a navel. His gaze finally landed on an equally wet thing, which had been roughly swung around by the earlier running…

“Mm,” Wen Fengjin said. “You did. It looks good on you.”

Wang Xiaomie, who’d been about to turn into a hamster from fright, was thrown off by Wen Fengjin’s gaze and lowered his head…only to see a certain appendage currently trembling in the cold breeze from the air conditioner. A beat of silence followed.

“Aaaaah!” A blush erupted across Wang Xiaomie’s face as he grabbed his sleep robe off the nearby chair and threw it on with no regard for the fact that he was still wet. His mind had been a complete blank as he rushed over, and he’d entirely forgotten to put on a bathrobe!

Once he was dressed, an embarrassed Wang Xiaomie angrily exclaimed, “I wasn’t talking about that hair! I meant my chest, my chest! Just now I was looking in the mirror and saw that there’s a red feather-like pattern all over my chest and shoulders! Zongzi are still corpses! Fengjin, do you think I’m gonna grow fuzz because I’ve reached my expiration date?! Weeehhh—”

Wen Fengjin remained silent. Wang Xiaomie took that to mean that he’d guessed correctly, and consequently became even more frightened. “Everything was fine before—why’d I suddenly develop all these red tattoos? Could it be because the summer’s been so hot? Don’t tell me I’m gonna start rotting in a few days… Just let me die and get it over with.” Thinking of the jiangshi in movies with their horrifying visages, pitch-black nails, and furry black bodies, Wang Xiaomie burst into tears.

Wen Fengjin frowned, climbing out of the casket to walk over to Wang Xiaomie’s side. He lifted up his wet hair with a hand. White vapor rose into the air as his hand swept over the dripping locks, quickly making them fluffy and dry.

With his other hand, he reached out and gently flipped open Wang Xiaomie’s sleep robe. The loose material slid down to reveal the attractive curves of round shoulders and a jutting collarbone. His smooth skin, unmarred by veins, looked delicate and young, announcing the endless hidden vitality of this body within which a heart was slowly beating. There was no sign of the red feathering that Wang Xiaomie had mentioned.

Sharp, ice-cold fingertips pressed against his skin, making a tiny dent as they brushed a path from the collarbone across that frail chest before Wen Fengjin finally placed an entire palm over the location of his heart.

Wang Xiaomie shivered slightly in trepidation.

Wen Fengjin examined the body he'd ritually refined with lowered eyes, but found nothing wrong. "A jiangshi can indeed grow a layer of hair on its skin, the color of which can be used to judge the jiangshi's age." He pulled his palm away to grip Wang Xiaomie's chin between his fingers instead, raising that noticeably worried face. Limpid eyes reflected a man with winding silver hair, so handsome that his features seemed sharp enough to cut. Wen Fengjin felt somewhat better upon seeing his own figure in those eyes, rosy lips stretching out in a thin smile. "But you aren't a real jiangshi—you were cultivated by my blood sacrifice, and after receiving that piece of Yan Chun, your heart can now slowly beat as well. Xiaomie, you're no different now than you were years ago. Are you sure it isn't just the stress of today?"

"It shouldn't be. I'm sure I saw it…" Wang Xiaomie carefully tried to recall what he'd seen in the mirror, but the mirror had also been fogged up at the time, and Wen Fengjin's words were now making him start to question himself. "It looked like a tattoo, all red, and shaped a lot like feathers."

Wen Fengjin thought it over for a moment before asking, "What were you doing earlier?"

"Nothing really. I was just taking a hot bath."

"Hot water, hm…"

Wen Fengjin suddenly wrapped both arms around Wang Xiaomie's waist, causing Wang Xiaomie to stumble slightly, forehead smacking into his chest. Before he could ask what was going on, something soft pressed against the back of his ear and sucked hard.

“…?!”

Pressing his smooth forehead hard against that sturdy chest, Wang Xiaomie curled his fingers tightly into the front of Wen Fengjin’s soft sleep robe, closing his eyes as he blushingly endured the treatment.

Half a minute later, a husky male voice sounded overhead, washing over the crown of his head and sinking into his brain.

But what the voice said was, “Finished.”

Finished? What was finished? Hands pressed against Wang Xiaomie’s shoulders and pushed him slightly away. There was no gentle or smiling expression on Wen Fengjin’s face as those deep eyes fixed coldly on his neck.

Wang Xiaomie tilted his head to take a look at his shoulder. “What the fuck? It appeared again!”

Thin red lines twined around his left breast and shoulder, extending all the way to his neck to form a pattern shaped like a multitude of feathers.

Wen Fengjin’s face darkened. When he touched the marks, he felt the same smooth skin as before, with not a single bump or bulge. They weren’t engraved into the skin like a tattoo, but more like red lines embedded in the flesh itself.

He pressed at the skin there, asking, “Does it hurt?”

Wang Xiaomie shook his head. “No, I don’t feel anything at all—this wasn’t here before. Do you think it’s because of Zhen Bei and that Yan Chun person from before?”

“We can’t be certain. It could also be related to the elixir of immortality. After all, there was only one pill, and not a single documented

account of it being used. There are certainly no precedents to judge the aftereffects of taking the elixir."

As he looked at the feathering, the first thought that popped into Wen Fengjin's head was the phrase "sprout wings and ascend to immortality"… but this phrase was normally used to refer to a Daoist's death. Something uncontrollable twisted his expression as he rubbed his finger over the spot.

He said, "Let's wait a night and see. If it's an effect of the elixir, then all we can do is take some time to observe it."

Wang Xiaomie nodded. The pattern on his body had once again disappeared in the time they were talking. The two of them lay back down in their casket, and the room fell into darkness after they turned out the light. Wang Xiaomie pressed close against Wen Fengjin, occasionally calling out "Xiao-Wenzi," and occasionally, "Fengjin."

Wen Fengjin didn't let this annoy him. He let Wang Xiaomie lay his head against his shoulder, occasionally placing little kisses against the top of his head. "Sleep. I'll watch over you."

His deep, sonorous voice gently comforted Wang Xiaomie, giving him a great sense of safety. "'Kay." With that short answer, he closed his eyes and dozed off for a while. But he still couldn't stop himself from sneaking an occasional peek at his shoulder in the darkness, or lifting his head to look at Wen Fengjin's chin.

Suddenly, a chilly kiss landed on his eyelid. His eye automatically squinted at this pressure, leaving the other one to blink somewhat nervously. "Xiao-Wenzi…"

"Mm?"

“Am I going to grow feathers all over my body and become a birdman eventually?”

“…You won’t.”

“Xiao-Wenzi.”

“Hm?”

“If…if I really do become a birdman, will you still…”

“I will.”

“…You’re really that sure about it? You’re not going to hesitate at all?”

“Mn.”

“…What’ll we do if I become such a big bird that I can’t sleep in the casket anymore, and have to sleep in a nest instead?”

“We’ll go back to the mausoleum—there’s space on the pining tree for a bird’s nest.”

“What if I end up laying eggs too?”

“Then lay them.”

“What’ll we do with the eggs once I’ve laid them? Should we steam them or fry them? Ha ha, I like them as steamed egg custard with a little salt on top.”

“We won’t eat them. We’ll hatch them.”

“…So we’ll hatch a brood of little bird people? Just imagine all those little sons and daughters eating bugs every day and flying all over the house… Who’s gonna raise ’em? I won’t.”

“I’ll raise them.”

Wang Xiaomie fell silent for a moment, then pulled open Wen Fengjin's loose sleep robe and buried his face inside, voice muffled as he said, "You really wouldn't hate them? We're talking about *bird people*!"

A long time passed without any answer. A puzzled Wang Xiaomie was just about to lift his head when he heard Wen Fengjin very honestly say, "…I would."

Wang Xiaomie went silent. *It's over. You're dead. I'm gonna kick you between the legs and end your family line, you scumbag!*

He bared his fangs, deciding to bite Wen Fengjin. He was just about to open his mouth and bite into the flesh before him when Wen Fengjin continued with, "But if they're yours, I won't."

Wang Xiaomie paused, closed his mouth, surreptitiously wiped off some saliva, and silently shoved his face back into Wen Fengjin's chest. "… Xiao-Wenzi."

"Hm?"

"I'm scared. I can't sleep. I don't want to become a birdman."

"I'm here with you."

"Sing a song for me, then. Maybe I'll fall asleep while I'm listening to it."

Wang Xiaomie had only meant that as an offhand remark, but to his surprise, Wen Fengjin really did start humming that old Northern Kingdom lullaby he used to sing. He mumbled, *I'm the one who taught you this one*, and then said nothing more. Wen Fengjin's voice really was nice to listen to. Husky, cold, with a particular low, sonorous tone to it. It could make your ears tingle the moment it left his throat.

There was no extra light within the gloom of the casket, the night pearls that illuminated it having been removed. Under a red blanket embroidered with twin phoenixes, Wang Xiaomie listened with lidded eyes to the lullaby, eyelids flickering a few times before he finally fell asleep.

When he woke up the next day, the sun was already high in the sky, and he realized he was still in Wen Fengjin's embrace. The moment he moved, Wen Fengjin opened his eyes and said, "You're awake?"

Wang Xiaomie stretched his stiff back and asked, "Mmhm. Did you not sleep last night?"

"I don't need sleep." Wen Fengjin placed a hand against Wang Xiaomie's neck and gave it a quick inspection. As always, there was nothing to be seen.

He'd been anxious all night, but this thing neither hurt nor itched, and they had no idea what it even was. Wang Xiaomie decided to simply stop worrying about it and leave everything to fate. He offered Wen Fengjin a few words of comfort, then continued doing whatever he needed to do. No matter what might happen tomorrow, he still had to address the needs of today.

Downstairs, Bai Yu had already gotten up and tidied up the furniture on his own. Wang Xiaomie came down to finish washing up, then went into the kitchen to make breakfast. Meanwhile, upstairs, Wen Fengjin stood before a modestly sized desk, upon which sat Bai Yu's cardboard box. He pulled a book out and flipped through it, a mysterious light flashing in his lowered eyes.

After Bai Yu moved in, Wang Xiaomie would often crack jokes with him. Though he'd recovered his memories, the deepest impression in Wang

Xiaomie's mind was still that of his carefree college days. With Bai Yu being a model jokester, the two could just watch a TV series together and still end up laughing so hard their stomachs hurt.

Wang Xiaomie did tell Bai Yu about the situation with his neck, and made sure to monitor it himself for a day. But the whole day went by, and not a single thing happened. Could it really be just a side effect of the elixir? Wang Xiaomie couldn't make heads or tails of it.

As dinnertime came, he decided to cook up some steaks, only to find that they were out of butter again. Olive oil would work too, but they didn't have any in the house! Wang Xiaomie raised his voice to yell, "*Fengjiiiiin*—we're out of butter!"

"We're out? I'll go buy it!" Bai Yu said, clinging to the door as he poked his head into the kitchen.

Wang Xiaomie thought for a moment before replying, "It'd be better to let Fengjin go buy it. There's only one market near the house that sells this stuff, and you might not know where it is. Also Fengjin's a little faster than you."

Bai Yu thought back to that vision of Wen Fengjin flying across rooftops and scratched his head, saying, "You got a point there."

Before long, royal errand boy Boss Wen descended from upstairs already dressed for the trip, and picked his keys and phone up off the table with practiced ease before heading out to buy butter. He showed not the slightest hint of displeasure at being used as an errand runner, a fact that left Bai Yu secretly moved. It looked like Wang Xiaomie was at the top of the food chain in this household!

Ten minutes later, a busily working Wang Xiaomie heard the doorbell ring, and walked out of the kitchen to find that Bai Yu had also come out of his room at the sound. The latter went to open the door, muttering, “That’s some serious speed. I didn’t think he’d get back so fast.”

Wang Xiaomie frowned. That wasn’t right—whenever Wen Fengjin made this trip, it always took at least *twenty* minutes. “Wait, don’t open the door just yet.”

“Huh?” Bai Yu immediately let go of the door handle, turning his head as he asked, “Something wrong?”

A nameless feeling growing inside him, Wang Xiaomie didn’t reply. Instead, he quickly stepping over to the villa’s front door and lifted the peephole cover.

Because it was night, and the man’s back was to the light, all he could tell was that it was an extremely average-looking person dressed in normal house clothes, like he was a neighbor come knocking for some issue or other. But they rarely ever met any neighbors around here, and whenever they saw each other on the street, they’d simply hurry by. Nobody ever stopped to have a chat.

“Maybe I’m overthinking things… You take a look, Da-Bai. For some reason I feel like there’s something off about this guy.” Wang Xiaomie stepped away to give Da-Bai room.

Puzzled, Bai Yu came over to look through the peephole. “What’s wrong? Is it not Boss Wen after all?”

Wang Xiaomie watched as Bai Yu looked through the peephole and froze. Panic was written all over his face when he finally turned around. He shakily whispered, “It’s him—*it’s him*!”

Wang Xiaomie furrowed his brow. “Him who? Who’re you talking about?”

Bai Yu’s pupils shrank and his face went pale. He pressed his hands against Wang Xiaomie’s shoulders and retreated to hide behind the sofa as he quietly cried out, sounding like he was on the edge of a nervous breakdown, “It’s that nonhuman who nearly killed me before!”

“…?!” Fuck, who would’ve thought he’d find his way to their door?! Wang Xiaomie’s face paled as well. And then he suddenly remembered—he still had Wen Fengjin! Nothing in the universe could possibly beat his little Wenzi. He’d send this bastard’s head flying in seconds!

With that thought, Wang Xiaomie ignited with grand ambition, comforting the curled-up ball that was the terrified Da-Bai. “The guy’s got guts coming to our door, but don’t worry, Da-Bai. Just you watch—my little Wenzi will beat him to death!”

“There’d be no problem with Boss Wen around. You’re right.” Bai Yu buried his face in his hands as he continued, “But he isn’t home right now!”

Oho—he’d completely forgotten this point.

Bai Yu said, “…What do we do now?”

Wang Xiaomie let out a sigh. “I think we can stand to be a little afraid now.”

Bai Yu was absolutely speechless.

Chapter 53:
Pretty Soldier Sailor Moon

THE GUY OUTSIDE WAS still ringing the doorbell, and it seemed as if he planned to keep doing so as long as they kept the door shut. The ear-piercing sound rang repeatedly throughout the house.

Inside, a pair of scrubs trembled as they clung to each other. Bai Yu asked, through chattering teeth, “Ge, Ge…is it just me, or does this feel kinda like *The Ring*?”

Wang Xiaomie went silent for a moment after taking in the pitch-black night and the incessantly ringing doorbell. Now that he mentioned it, he could see the similarities.

“…Let’s hide upstairs. We’ve just got to hold out until Fengjin gets back!” Wang Xiaomie lowered his voice as he said, “Come on, quietly now.”

Bai Yu nodded, and the two of them slowly made their way out from where they squatted behind the sofa, heading toward the stairs.

It was at this moment, however, that the ear-piercing doorbell suddenly stopped ringing. The huge room instantly fell silent; Wang Xiaomie and Bai Yu froze in place, then exchanged a look.

Da-Bai gulped as he turned back to ask Wang Xiaomie, “Why’d he stop ringing the bell…? Do you think he left?”

“I don’t think it’s very likely.” Wang Xiaomie lifted himself up slightly to look in the direction of the front door. “Wait, the bastard didn’t get inside, did he?!”

“Fuck, don’t scare me!” Bai Yu’s dark face whitened a good few degrees at his words, his big eyes flitting back and forth in wide-eyed fear. He might manage to die of fright before the guy actually entered the house.

Wang Xiaomie comforted him as he examined the room. “You can make tools, can’t you? And you’ve stalked him before too, so what are you getting scared for?!”

Bai Yu mumbled, “I wasn’t scared back then because I thought I could beat him.”

Wang Xiaomie, seeing no one else in their vicinity, drew back into hiding before turning to ask, “Then what about now?”

The swarthy Bai Yu very honestly said, “I now think I overestimated myself.”

Wang Xiaomie’s mouth twitched in wordless disbelief. Afraid to go wandering around at random, he sat down with his back against the sofa while Bai Yu curled up into a ball next to him.

Thump thump thump.

Thump thump thump.

Wang Xiaomie turned and said: “Bai Yu, could you stop trembling? Your foot’s shaking so hard it sounds like a pile driver.”

Bai Yu couldn’t make heads or tails of this. “I’m not shaking, though.”

“Don’t tell me you aren’t. If that’s true, then why do I keep hearing a thumping sound?”

“Maybe you’re the one shaking?”

Wang Xiaomie shot him a glare. “Bullshit, the slippers I’m wearing couldn’t make this noise no matter *how* hard I shook them.”

“But I’m wearing slippers too!”

The two stared at each other, each seeing panic in the other’s eyes. “If it isn’t you or me, then who could it be? Don’t tell me…”

Thump thump thump.

Thump thump thump.

At this sound so close to them, Bai Yu barely managed to stop himself from crying aloud. Wang Xiaomie’s face paled dramatically as well. He listened closely for a while, and figured out that the source of the noise was probably coming from the French window across from the sofa.

Wang Xiaomie reached out to poke Bai Yu, mouthing, *It’s coming from the French window—let’s both take a look together—*

A pale-lipped Bai Yu nodded, and Wang Xiaomie quietly counted, “One…two…three!”

A pair of black and white heads quickly popped out from behind the sofa and looked in the direction of the French window. The man in everyday wear stood there, cheerfully smiling at them, curled fingers knocking repeatedly against the glass of the window. At the sight, their hackles practically erupted like porcupine quills, a layer of sweat instantly forming on their backs.

“Fuck fuck fuck!” Bai Yu screamed and pulled Wang Xiaomie back behind the sofa again. Wang Xiaomie’s heartbeat had gone erratic as well; he gasped for breath, badly shaken.

“Why isn’t Boss Wen back yeeeeet?!” Bai Yu was too terrified even for tears as he looked over at Wang Xiaomie, saying, “Ge, you’re a good person, and that guy’s here for me. In a minute I’m gonna open the door and rush out. You…you run upstairs and hide. I’ll eat your steaks in the next life.”

Wang Xiaomie never thought that Bai Yu, as terrified as he was at the moment, could still be so righteously selfless. As much as he was moved by this, he felt an equal urge to laugh at the fact that this guy could still remember they were having steaks for dinner despite how scared he was.

This had always been a problem with him: The more nervous or frightened he got, the easier it was to make him laugh. Indeed, he did end up laughing out loud, which relieved a great deal of the pressure he felt.

He patted Da-Bai’s shoulder, saying, “Don’t worry, neither of us is gonna die. Just think about what happened with that girl yesterday. Didn’t we survive that just fine? Look, your weapon’s on the first floor, and my dagger’s on the second floor. Each of us will rush to our own rooms, then we’ll come back down and eliminate that bastard!”

Plus, Wen Fengjin would be back in another five minutes. So if nothing else, they just needed to hold on until then.

Bai Yu wiped the cold sweat off his brow and nodded energetically. “Okay!”

The two shared a look, calmly bracing themselves to make a run for it, but right at this moment a scream suddenly sounded from outside the window. This was immediately followed by the muffled yet violent sound of fighting.

Wang Xiaomie and Bai Yu's eyes both lit up at this. Could it be that Wen Fengjin had returned?! They surreptitiously stuck their heads out in an attempt to look outside.

Upon seeing that the man outside the window had disappeared, Wang Xiaomie hesitated a moment before saying, "You wait here for me. I'll go take a look."

He then picked up a small teapot that was next to the sofa. But as he began to head over, Bai Yu pulled him back. "Don't go, Ge. I'll go first! If things go south, I'm a faster runner than you are."

But I'm immortal! I've got infinite save files. If you die once, that's game over for you.

At the stubborn look in Da-Bai's eyes, however, Wang Xiaomie could only say, "We'll go together. It's a little safer that way."

"Okay."

And so the two—one wielding a teapot, the other carrying a vase—surreptitiously shuffled over to that French window. The sound of fighting grew gradually clearer. All that remained where the man had been standing was a puddle of some pitch-black, blood-like substance.

The sounds of fighting, meanwhile, were coming from the villa's courtyard. When Wang Xiaomie and Bai Yu opened the window to take a look, their jaws dropped in shock at the sight of the tussling pair.

A long moment passed.

Wang Xiaomie rubbed his eyes and expressionlessly asked Bai Yu, "Hey uh, is there something wrong with my eyes? Why does it feel like I just saw Sailor Moon?"

Bai Yu's throat bobbed as he dazedly replied, "I actually never watched that anime…but if you're saying that person with gold pigtails, a blue-and-white skirt, and a moon tiara who's currently bashing that guy's head in with a bloodstained magical wand is called Sailor Moon, then that's great…"

Silence fell.

Wang Xiaomie face-palmed. It really was effin' Sailor Moon, of all people! What day was it? Did the channels get switched or something?

If you're fighting a zongzi, shouldn't the fighters be Daoist priests of some sort? Even if Daoist Lin or Daoist Mao or whoever was too expensive to hire, why the heck would you pull out a Sailor Scout unless it was to mess with us?! And it's the frickin' berserker version, too?! There's blood being whipped around along with her pigtails! Are magical girl wands supposed to hit like bricks? That guy's already transformed into something terrifying, but he's also been beaten so hard he's spitting blood!

"Aaaahh! I'll kill yoouuu! Aaaahhh!" The man, whose skin and veins were all exposed, covered in blood and baring a terrifying visage, struggled wildly on the ground. Immediately after he yelled this threat, the emotionless yet brutal Sailor Scout bashed him so hard with her magic wand that screams rang out through the air.

A tiny puddle of blood began to form on the ground. The dull thumps made their bodies flinch with sympathetic pain. Even Wang Xiaomie and Bai Yu couldn't help frowning, covering their eyes and peeking through the cracks of their fingers instead of watching the scene directly.

Anyone could see that this was all a one-sided beating. The weird Sailor Scout was clearly a whole lot tougher than that monstrous man. The

man—or monster—very quickly stopped moving. She flicked the blood off her magical wand and got up, with an indifferent expression that didn't fit her sweet face in the slightest. Her pretty eyes coldly fixed in Wang Xiaomie and Bai Yu's direction as she walked over without a word.

Wang Xiaomie, gazing at the viscous liquid dripping from her cartoony magic wand, hurriedly pulled Bai Yu with him as he took a step back backward. Who knew what to expect of a Sailor Scout who showed up at your door dressed in a ridiculous outfit in the middle of the night—especially one as violent as this!

The sight of the girl slowly walking toward them snapped Bai Yu out of his daze, and he nervously backed away, shouting a warning without any confidence in his voice. "Wh-what do you want?! I'm warning you, don't go thinking I won't fight you just because you're a girl!"

Wang Xiaomie was about to say, “We’re lucky if *she* doesn’t beat *us*”—when, to their surprise, the Sailor Scout across from them really did stop in her tracks. *Hm?! It actually worked?!*

“Fuck, has my badass energy grown that strong?” Bai Yu, noticeably taken aback, started chuckling with a hint of pride.

But before he could finish applauding himself, the Sailor Scout went expressionless and started shaking all over, like a wooden puppet being jerked by its strings. Wang Xiaomie and Bai Yu were shaken by this change. Wang Xiaomie furrowed his brow as he called out to her, somewhat hesitantly, “Hey, are you okay, miss? Hello?”

“Do you think she’s injured or sick or something?” Bai Yu was a little nervous as well. “Was it something I said? Even scammers don’t put on acts like this!”

“Maybe we should go over to check on her?” Wang Xiaomie said.

“But what if she’s a bad guy?” Bai Yu looked somewhat uncertainly at Wang Xiaomie. Considering the state she’d left her foe in, there was no way she was an average human being herself.

But before they could come to a decision, the Sailor Scout fell to her knees with a crash, coincidentally facing right in Wang Xiaomie’s direction.

He thought, …*Rise, my loyal minister. I have no red packets to give.*

It wasn’t until the Sailor Scout was halfway down that they saw Wen Fengjin standing behind her. He carried a shopping bag in one hand. The other was held aloft, with fingers slightly curled. His black clothes, silver hair, and that red pattern on his forehead were brighter than ever before, a dark sliver of red flashing in his deep eyes.

When he slightly moved his raised hand, the Sailor Scout on the ground started hugging herself in even greater pain. An invisible wind rose up, and the suffocating atmosphere reminded Wang Xiaomie of the time he and Wen Fengjin faced off against Yan Chun and his team in the mausoleum. “Xiao-Wenzi!”

“Boss Wen!”

Wang Xiaomie immediately relaxed upon seeing Wen Fengjin, a happy expression appearing on his face. But when Bai Yu started to walk over to him, Wen Fengjin suddenly shook his head. He turned and addressed a dark corner to his side, which the dim glow of the streetlights failed to illuminate. “This thing on the ground—is it yours?”

Something moved within the darkness, gradually revealing itself within their field of vision. It was a man wearing an old-fashioned braid and a magua jacket. He looked to be a little under thirty, with young and handsome features, like a mild-mannered scholar from a well-to-do family. But what should have been a head of black hair was already speckled with white, like that of someone in their fifties or sixties.

He stood with his hands behind his back, mouth lifting slightly at the corners. His eyes were long and narrow in a way that should have made him look fox-like, but instead, seemed gentle. “I am truly sorry. Please don’t be angry. I am an Artisan like you, and my child has been irresponsibly chasing this jiangshi for quite some time.” He cupped his hands and said to Wen Fengjin, “Taking into account that she rescued these two, I hope that you will spare my child.”

This man exuded a mature and steady air that didn’t quite match his outward appearance, like an old cultivator whose meditations had reached a

point where nothing could ever make him blush. When he smiled, it was very genuine, and his tone was deeply sincere, making it impossible to get angry with him.

As he finished speaking, a colossal pressure and formidable power ferociously rushed his way, strong enough to instantly shatter someone's innards and send them to the hospital. Yet the man's smile didn't change in the slightest. He still maintained the same position, hands cupped.

"Rescued?" Wen Fengjin gazed at him for a while with a smile that didn't reach his eyes, releasing the hand that had been controlling the strange girl on the ground as he said, "You can take her with you, but if I ever see her coming to rescue anything here again, the only thing you'll be able to take back is her head."

The man straightened up, nodding without any change in expression. "I will keep that in mind."

He let his hands drop. The smile fell from his handsome face as he walked over to the girl and lifted her motionless body off the ground with one hand, cradling her in his arms as if she were his daughter. He even tapped her on the nose, saying, "Are you satisfied with your mischief now? I hope you've learned your lesson."

It looked like a scolding, but his tone was exceedingly soft. After saying those words, he stood up, adjusted the weight of the child in his arms, and started to walk away—only to accidentally make eye contact with the other person in the window. A shocked look appeared on the man's face, his slender eyes even widening a bit. He took a couple of steps forward, as if seized with some sudden impulse. His forehead even touched the glass.

But he very quickly stopped. Bloody threads slowly trickled from his pale neck, red specks dotting the collar of his magua.

Wen Fengjin was right behind him. “Get your gaze off his body.” That foreboding voice gently wormed into both their ears. “He belongs to me.”

“This really is—my apologies.” The man’s fingers twitched once, and he took a small step back, once again recovering his gently smiling appearance. “You have quite a nice collection, but *he* may have found a bit of trouble. I’ve come across similar situations before. If you ever need assistance, you can come find me any time.”

The man tapped a finger against his own shoulder and, after delivering this hint, gently placed a business card on the ground.

“Well then, I’ll see you again.” The magua-clad man, with the strange girl in his arms, then disappeared outside the villa.

With peace finally restored, a pair of sharpened fingernails lifted the card off the ground.

Wang Xiaomie opened the French window and leapt over to Wen Fengjin, quickly recounting the terrifying event they’d just been through. Bai Yu also sighed in relief as he carefully replaced the vase he’d been holding.

Meanwhile…

The handsome magua-clad man with the salt-and-pepper braid walked with a still and silent girl in his arms down the equally still and silent street. He bounced her up to prevent her from sliding from his grip, gazing lovingly down at her as he said, “Wasn’t he beautiful? Even more so

than the guests we've received between us? Was it because of him that you disobeyed my orders?"

There was no response.

"All right, all right. Don't be difficult. It won't be long now…" The man lifted his head to look at the moon hanging above in the dark night. "He's certain to come looking for me…"

Chapter 54:
Honest Children Get “Candy” to Eat

A MONTH PASSED BY.

Wang Xiaomie looked at himself in the mirror to see a red feather pattern winding upward from his chest, the continuous tattoo—upon which even the feathery down was clearly drawn—contrasting beautifully with his pale skin, like roses on a snowy day.

He poked at a spot on the left side of his face near the arc of his chin, where red, pointy buds were quietly sprouting. They were now a half finger longer than they were a month ago. Smooth fingertips mapped the measurements from the corner of his left eye, down in a straight line to where those red buds were sprouting. They were even closer to his eye now.

Since it wound around his body, he and the tattoo had now become closely bound to each other, while simultaneously being entirely separate individuals. They were like mother and child in the late stages of pregnancy, each able to clearly sense the other’s presence.

Those smooth fingertips pressed down hard, and a sharp, indescribable pain radiated from the feather pattern beneath his touch. Wang Xiaomie frowned and drew back his hand, biting his lower lip with a somewhat unpleasant expression.

This wasn’t the only strange thing going on, however.

Wang Xiaomie went back to the upstairs bedroom. As soon as he entered the room, his eyes couldn’t help falling upon the person sitting at the desk. Right then, his gaze seemed to add a filter—a nameless light

flashing in the depths of his eyes as they greedily swept over the man currently leaning back against the chair with crossed legs, a book in one raised hand, those long and narrow eyes lowered in concentration.

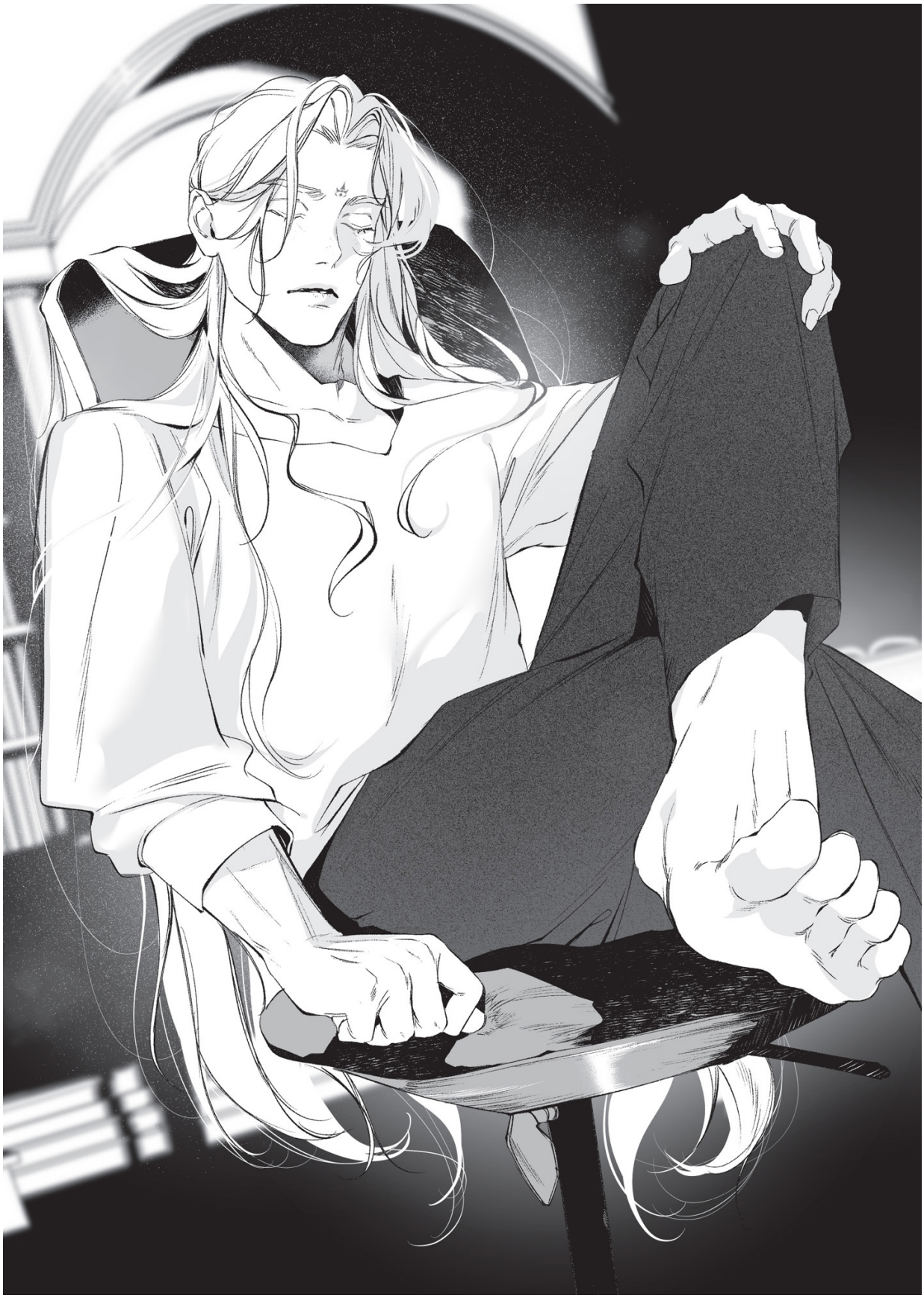
The room was suffused with the bitter aroma of medicine—the characteristic aroma of that man's body.

In this moment, Wang Xiaomie felt as if he'd switched video feeds and was now gazing through a stranger's eyes, using what felt like a god's viewpoint to become newly reacquainted with this man who slept daily by his side. His gaze swiveled, eyes filled with unknowable meaning as they wandered across that slender body full of hidden strength.

The other man had also just gotten out of the bath. The silken threads of his silver hair formed a noble and gorgeous spread, a few strands falling onto his shoulders and sliding down his abdomen to curl into silver coils, while others draped over his cheeks to create arcs, which were then pressed behind his back. But most of the hair wound around the back of his chair to descend upon the clean, plush carpet.

His loose sleep robe did nothing to hide those long, straight legs. If you placed your hands on them and slid your way down from the knees to his ankles, you'd feel like you'd never reach the end.

Those legs suddenly moved, and Wang Xiaomie blinked as if he'd been burned, feeling somewhat ashamed. Yet his gaze still stubbornly peered through the strange visual angle of the long lashes covering his eyes.



His gaze next landed on the man's chest. The man truly had a wonderful figure. He was, after all, called the number one practitioner of martial arts back in the day, so his build naturally wasn't as insubstantial as Wang Xiaomie's. His chest presented a swath of firm, beautifully textured skin, each square of flesh promising great strength. At rest it brimmed with beauty, but when flexed, it filled with a great and wild power. He was a resting silver beast of prey, gaze lowered in quiet hibernation, but once he attacked, he would rip everything to shreds, exposing your flesh and your heart and your most deeply hidden darkness to the open air…

Wang Xiaomie's throat bobbed as he softly let out the breath he'd been holding, then raised a hand to cover his nose and mouth.

The added detail of silver hair gave that face a serene, luxurious, somewhat haughty beauty, from the blazing red pattern on his forehead to his long eyes with their deep-set sockets, which cast a circular shadow that made the bridge of his nose look straight and tall. Beneath that nose was a mouth with perfectly formed lips: very red, very smooth, the upper lip slightly thin, while the lower lip was exactly right. When he smiled, it was with the reserved solemnity of a king.

Wang Xiaomie looked him over in extreme detail. From his point of view, he had been doing so slowly and for a long time, but in reality, only a few seconds had passed. The other man had also caught sight of him. When those almost entirely black eyes looked over toward him, he quickly turned his gaze away in a panic.

Am I sick or something? What's wrong with me today?

Wang Xiaomie lowered his head, pretending to towel off his hair. In his peripheral vision he glimpsed a pair of feet treading across the fluffy

carpet, dark blue pile sinking down only to swell back forth between the other man's toes, until those feet finally stopped right in front of him.

The man leaned toward him, a large and slightly chilly hand pressing against the back of his head to sink fingers into his dripping-wet hair. Wang Xiaomie lowered the towel out of habit to let him dry it. Sharp fingers carded through black hair, combing it out a little at a time.

At this moment, Wang Xiaomie's nose was only a few centimeters away from Wen Fengjin's throat. His gaze laser-focused upon that clearly defined collarbone and that neck that was entirely defenseless against him, from which a rich, bitter aroma wafted forth. Wang Xiaomie grit his teeth tightly together.

"What's wrong with you today? You haven't said a word this whole time." Wen Fengjin's deep voice suddenly sounded from above.

That one phrase seemed to snap something within him. Wang Xiaomie froze for a moment, his gaze entirely blank. He rubbed his eyes with a hand, feeling almost as if he'd been bewitched or something a moment ago. "…It's nothing. I'm just a little tired."

"Liar." Wen Fengjin let out a low laugh. "It isn't as if we truly need to sleep."

Wang Xiaomie laughed a little as well. "I've grown used to sleeping every day."

"By the way, how are you doing with that pattern on your body?"

"Oh…that." *Don't tell him. It's not like it hurts. Don't tell him.* Wang Xiaomie felt at his shoulder with a smile. "It's fine."

"Is it? Let me see."

“You don’t have to. Let’s go lie in the casket for a while. It’s almost time for bed.”

“All right.”

A few minutes later, within the red couple’s casket, Wen Fengjin turned his head with a silent sigh and covered Wang Xiaomie’s eyes with a hand. “Weren’t you going to sleep? What are you staring at me like that for?”

Wang Xiaomie blinked, his long lashes brushing against Wen Fengjin’s chilly palm. The sensation was both numbing and itchy.

“I don’t know. I suddenly just want to look at you today.”

Wen Fengjin was momentarily thrown off by this honest confession. Then, his lips gradually lifted into a joyful curve, warmth filling his eyes.

Honestly, Wang Xiaomie himself was dumbstruck by the words that had come out of his mouth. He honestly had no idea why he was acting like he’d drunk a truth potion today—he’d usually keep these things to himself, surreptitiously taking advantage of Wen Fengjin just a tiny bit in his mind. Even though he and Wen Fengjin had known each other for two lifetimes now, he still felt a little embarrassed by sweet talk. He could be as reckless as he wanted on the internet or in his head, but when he was faced with the real person in the flesh, his brain would freeze up like a jammed printer.

Wang Xiaomie shot back a straightforward question. “Do you not like me looking at you?” Inwardly he thought, *What the heck am I saying?*

Wen Fengjin chuckled at his words. “I like it.”

Wang Xiaomie said, “I also like it—I like looking at you, and I like you looking at me.”

I’m gonna explode from embarrassment! Why can’t I frickin’ control my mouth anymore?! I’m dying, fuck!

Wen Fengjin withdrew the hand blocking Wang Xiaomie’s gaze. Two pairs of eyes gazed directly at each other. After a long moment, Wen Fengjin smiled a mysterious not-quite-smile, and voiced a long, drawn-out “Hmmmm.”

A smile and some other mysterious expression shaped his half-closed eyes. Silver hair draped over his shoulders, sinister yet bewitching. “So, it is what I think it is?”

Chilly hands interlaced with Wang Xiaomie’s, brushing against the soft pads of his fingers.

On the inside, Wang Xiaomie was wildly shaking his head. … *Nonono it isn’t!*

But in reality, Wang Xiaomie was very frankly nodding his head. “Yes, I want it.”

…*I’ve definitely been possessed. That’s gotta be it,* he thought, too despairing even for tears.

When he said this, Wen Fengjin’s laughter sounded even more like that of a demon about to enjoy a sweet treat. “You’ve been denying me all this time. I actually thought you didn’t enjoy it.”

Wang Xiaomie was so terrified he was getting goosebumps down his back. Outwardly, he started quietly rambling in a tsundere sort of way.

“It’s not that I don’t like it. It’s just that I still need to show some restraint, and it’s a little embarrassing for me too. But if I reject you once you can always ask a second time. It’s not like I’m *really* rejecting you. I wanted to say this before, but every time you say how much you love me,

then simply retreat because of one rejection—hmph, are you a man or not?! Can't you come on to me more strongly?! Don't you understand so simple a rule as giving in after making a show of reluctance?!"

The moment these words left his mouth, Wang Xiaomie wanted nothing more than to kill himself by smashing his head against Wen Fengjin's abs.

I don't get it. I seriously don't get it. Ah, I can't figure out what in the world I'm doing anymore! What the fuck—is this something a human being would say?! Do I have no shame?! Shut uuuuuppp!

He'd already figured out there was something unusual about himself today—almost as though he was consciously watching himself throw a drunken fit, as though he'd lost all dignity!

Wang Xiaomie wanted to cover his mouth, but his hands were intertwined with Wen Fengjin's, and no amount of tugging could pull them free. He could only watch as Wen Fengjin's smile grew increasingly more delighted, and listen despairingly as their conversation proceeded.

Wen Fengjin said, smiling, "Oh, so that's what you were thinking all this time?"

It isn't! I wasn't! "That's right! Lately, you've just been reading those old books and not paying any attention to me—hmph, either you're frigid or you can't get it up anymore!"

Wen Fengjin raised his eyebrows with a laugh. "Can't get it up anymore? Would you like to test it out for yourself?"

Nonono thanks! "Okay."

…Ah, RIP me.

The man leaned over to press Wang Xiaomie beneath him, shoulders shaking from laughter. Never in his life had Wang Xiaomie wanted to combust on the spot more than he did at this moment.

“Are you drunk?”

“I’m not.”

“You want me that badly?”

“Mmhm.” The sweet little zongzi nodded, with a childishly innocent look on his face. “…You’ve barely talked to me at all of late. I’ve been really lonely.”

As for the inner Wang Xiaomie? He was already dead as a doornail.

Wen Fengjin also felt that Wang Xiaomie was being a little strange today. He smiled as he rubbed the lines of Wang Xiaomie’s finger pads with their interlaced hands, pressed his nose against his neck, and sniffed carefully.

The gaze that met his told him that this wasn’t a fake. It really was his shixiong, his Mian Deng, his Xiaomie. Even in the darkness, those eyes were as clear as ever; the only change seemed to be a light dusting of red on the cheeks and ears.

So it really was a case of having neglected him? Wen Fengjin gave Wang Xiaomie’s lips a little bite.

But he’d also noticed that Shixiong was being unexpectedly honest today. So Wen Fengjin mischievously leaned right into his ear and said, “I’ll satisfy any request you have. So what is it you want? Hm?”

The person beneath him responded quietly. Wen Fengjin’s smile deepened, a bitter medicinal aroma filling the air.

“All right,” he said. “I will grant your desire.”

Wen Fengjin was intimately knowledgeable about the body he’d once taken such painstaking care of, and which he now faced every day. With their forms melding into each other, long silver hair spilled into black, tangling and intertwining. Soft, moist lips jostled each other in a forceful kiss, pressing down so hard that they paled and changed form. Wang Xiaomie was no longer as reserved and bashful as usual, opening his mouth and half closing his eyes as he docilely allowed the man pushing down on his body to plunder him as he willed.

A scarlet tongue burrowed into his mouth to quickly hook his own, winding around it and drawing it out from between his lips before the other’s warm mouth encompassed it to suck at it vigorously.

“Mmnn—”

The sensitive tip of his tongue began to affect his lower body. Wen Fengjin’s hands slipped into Wang Xiaomie’s sleep robe, passing under his arms to pinch the back of his neck and prevent him from shrinking away from the kiss. His other hand spread its fingers wide to rub at his compact waist, moving slowly downward to press against his buttocks. Soft flesh was molded and deformed underneath that large palm like two lumps of dough. That pale rump indignantly filled the spaces between his fingers as he pressed his hand roughly into it. The rubbed areas instantly reddened, coloring the pale white skin.

They kissed with ardent enthusiasm, jaw fiercely clashing against jaw, the sensation of sharp teeth colliding with lips bringing a stinging sense of pleasure. An appropriate amount of pain could make a man go wild in his lovemaking.

Wang Xiaomie placed a hand over Wen Fengjin's chest within the dim darkness of the room. The man's tongue thrust and stirred in Wang Xiaomie's mouth, stray strands of silver hair tickling his cheeks. Quickening breaths came in warm puffs against each other's faces, like they were about to burn up.

Something hard pressed against his naked abdomen, the loose sleep robes having long since been tossed aside in their mutual caresses. That organ rose into a large bulge that could be noticeably felt through the thin cloth of a pair of men's underwear. Wang Xiaomie let out a hot breath, the tingling itch of climax sending his chest straining upward, brushing pointy nubs against the other man's breast. The saliva in his mouth wet his lips, which stuck together with muffled smacks.

There were some who said sex was subtly connected to abuse. A person might say they want to pull back, yet inwardly desire to be ruthlessly hurt and vigorously penetrated, compelling them to lift their chest on withdrawal and prompt their partner to slam them into the ground on penetration, immobilizing all their limbs and lifting that one sensitive area into the air to cater to quick and powerful thrusts, bringing them to an orgasm so powerful as to send them into shock…

Before he'd even been penetrated, Wang Xiaomie's sexual fantasies were already sending his mind to the brink of climax.

Wen Fengjin pulled his tongue back. Wang Xiaomie lifted his head and opened his mouth to accept his partner's retreat, gasping for breath, arms wrapped around his shoulders, bashfully yet impatiently using his chest to rub against Wen Fengjin's. The tiny nubs of his nipples were as hard as a pair of pebbles.

“Don’t rush.” Wen Fengjin laughed hoarsely, loosening the hand that had been holding Wang Xiaomie’s neck in place so that he could tug down his lover’s underwear and let the scorching, unripe object within bounce free. Both Wang Xiaomie and his member were inexperienced in this respect. Though he’d received Wen Fengjin from behind more than once, his member was still untouched in its innocence, having never been used that way. Even the slightest stimulation was enough to make it spill its seed.

“You won’t last a minute this way.”

Sharp, chilly fingers rubbed against that little darling, immediately causing it to swell and spit out a few white droplets, even though Wang Xiaomie was doing his best to resist…

“Let’s have you relax first. Trying to restrain yourself will make it uncomfortable.”

Wen Fengjin finally adjusted their positions, lowering his head to bite Wang Xiaomie’s left nipple with immaculately straight white teeth—not hard, but enough to spark a little pain, and even more pleasure.

Wang Xiaomie instantly came all over Wen Fengjin’s abdomen, sticky white spunk emanating a masculine odor, stretching out wetly in short, viscous threads that dripped onto Wang Xiaomie’s lower belly.

“Mmn, that’s quite a lot.” Wen Fengjin released the little fruit from his mouth, his scarlet tongue roughly pressing down its pebbled surface and scraping hard across it, bit by bit.

“*Haah—*” Wang Xiaomie breathed out the air he’d been holding. The aroma of medicine grew so strong that he felt drunk on it. He threw out his chest with bleary eyes, trembling with pleasure and panting in enjoyment as Wen Fengjin drew devastating circles around his chest with

his tongue. A warm mouth took in an areola and its accompanying nub. Wen Fengjin licked away at the sweet, creamy scent of complete defenselessness that emanated from the very depths of his soul.

Wen Fengjin tore away the underwear, which by now was entirely useless in hiding Wang Xiaomie's desire. The sound of tearing cloth pierced the ear and left a red mark on the delicate flesh of his ass. The sharp pain made Wang Xiaomie bring his legs tight together.

The shredded underwear was used to wipe away the liquid on their bellies. Those two nubs of flesh on his chest were so swollen by now that they looked about to bleed. Wen Fengjin released them, moving on to leave a field of bruise-like kiss marks all over Wang Xiaomie's body…

He then removed his own layer of concealment, and a certain something leapt free. Wen Fengjin firmly held Wang Xiaomie beneath him, their nipples and straining lengths pressing close together before the hand that had been kneading at his buttocks finally slid its way into that crack.

With Wen Fengjin's thrusting movements sending his body rising and falling, Wang Xiaomie felt as if he should be more embarrassed than before. Instead he found himself impatiently opening his legs, the tortured moans he emitted leading to his lower lip getting bitten in punishment, after which came a long and furious kiss.

It was like he'd gone mad. He'd already lost all his dignity, so wouldn't it be a waste of an opportunity not to lie back and take it at this point?

Wang Xiaomie had noticed that Wen Fengjin didn't like to speak when they were making love, like how a wild beast moved with purpose

when hunting its prey—a silent eruption, beauty and blood mixing together, making you tremble uncontrollably…

Their bodies were both warm, and so was their ejaculate. But his innards were warmer. When something slightly cool was inserted inside him, Wang Xiaomie shed tears from the stimulation.

His fantasy had become reality. Wen Fengjin's body was full of explosive power, strong and ferocious. He was dexterously and ruthlessly penetrated; his body rose with each quick withdrawal, then was suddenly slammed into the ground with each deep thrust. The fierce pounding left his insides so sore it approached pain. The screaming pleasure from his prostate only belatedly reached his brain.

Wang Xiaomie started to cry and scream. The man above him supported himself with arms on either side of his head, chilly strands of hair falling over his body as he joyfully looked at Wang Xiaomie's reddened neck and face, and orgasm-induced tears.

He even drank in the sound of his screams with the appreciation of a man listening to beautiful music. The louder Wang Xiaomie yelled and the harder he cried, the more abuse he drew from the man above him, his delicate body quickly bumping up and down against the blanket beneath him from the force of the thrusts.

A sweet scent emitted from his trembling chest.

Wang Xiaomie decided to cut his losses and give himself up to desire, raising his legs high to wrap them around Wen Fengjin's waist. This way, every thrust filled him up. The length and girth of Wen Fengjin were so great that he almost felt as if he would pass right through him and emerge from his mouth.

The prickle of balls and hair against his skin had turned his ass red, making the slapping seem even more like beating.

Endless orgasms made his inner passage grow slick amid the rough grinding against his prostate, which pumped the secretions out of his tight, gulping hole to make a wet, sticky mess in the area where they kept continuously linking. The slippery noises this made were so loud that Wang Xiaomie soaked the pillow with tears. He was truly crying so hard his entire face was wet—not from embarrassment, but from Wen Fengjin's fucking.

The beast atop him wasn't gracefully doting on him, but fucking him so hard he felt he was tearing apart, quickly and vigorously thrusting in and out of that opening in his ass. The flesh of his thighs shook from the pounding, constantly twitching with pleasure.

Wang Xiaomie let out another scream. He bit his lips and desperately shook his head, only to be penetrated straight through the moment he was about to speak. Sweat and tears stuck his long hair to his cheeks in a spiderweb of threads. There was a pleading look in his tear-filled eyes, making him look equal parts innocent and licentiously seductive.

The sight made Wen Fengjin smile as he filled his belly with cum. Being slightly cooler than his insides, the seminal fluid caused the entire passage to contract, his legs and innards both spasming wildly; Wang Xiaomie arched up hard for a moment before dazedly falling back onto the soft red blanket beneath him. A pale, dripping wet body and coils of long black hair all sank into soft, bloodred blankets.

Wen Fengjin lifted his eyes, staring in slight captivation. A damp and still somewhat hard penis slid out of the hole below, bringing wet, sticky liquid out with it.

Wen Fengjin lifted up the person on the blanket and said in a coaxing tone, “Shixiong, kneel there for me, and brace your hands against the edge.”

Wang Xiaomie had yet to recover from his climax, his body soft and boneless. “I don’t have any strength left. I really don’t—”

“Liar.”

Wen Fengjin easily placed him in a kneeling position on the casket’s pillow, slim and delicate arms extended to cling to the casket’s edge. Both of his legs trembled, white liquid dripping down them. A certain someone draped over his body, then continued to penetrate him…

Slender fingers, unable to bear the stimulation, dug into the red wood of the casket as their owner moaned and screamed. Someone gripped his waist, slamming into him so hard he was about to break, leaving countless kisses across his scapula before finally biting down on his neck, fresh blood falling from it.

The wound would heal quickly; Wen Fengjin narrowed his eyes, a light flashing in those dark orbs as he used his tongue to brush away those few droplets of blood. “If only I could leave a mark.”

He wildly fucked into Wang Xiaomie, as if dissatisfied by something. He wanted to make those eyes flow with even more tears, make that mouth shape even more sweet and sticky cries.

Wang Xiaomie was pushed to a dribbling climax a few more times. He weakly released his grip and fell, taking that entire rod fully into his bottom, crying silently as Wen Fengjin embraced his pliant body and gave a last few powerful thrusts before coming inside him too.

It was hard to see his shoulders in the dim light of the lamp. But he could still see that red pattern spreading upward from his chest, as lewd as it

was beautiful.

The next morning, Wang Xiaomie expressionlessly lifted up the complete mess that was his hair. If it weren't for his great restorative abilities, he truly had no idea how he could have lived to see the morning—and he had even less of an idea what manner of unclean thing he must've eaten yesterday to make him court death by saying all those things to Wen Fengjin!

But it wasn't long before he realized something even more terrifying.

He…had completely lost the ability to lie!

Chapter 55:
Truth Bug

HUMANS WERE BOUND to say something insincere at some point in their lives. Little white lies, mean-spirited deceptions, socially appropriate greetings.

“I’m a little busy. Let’s talk again next time.”

“You look good in this outfit.”

“It’s been a while. Have you lost weight?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll definitely get better.”

“I’m fine.”

“You’re my best friend.”

“I’ll always be by your side.”

We might all utter a few little lies without even thinking about it—through our cell phone screens, to strangers, to those close to us, or even to ourselves. Doing so didn’t just protect us, but more often than not allowed us to reassure others.

Today, Wang Xiaomie discovered he no longer had this ability.

Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that he’d become this way starting from the night before.

Wang Xiaomie, sitting cross-legged on the sofa with his eyes closed, crossed his arms as he thought back to what happened yesterday—which of course *definitely* didn’t include the part where they did you-know-what!

No, he was wondering why it was that after the feather pattern on his shoulders started growing, his speech started to become…strange. It couldn't be…

Wang Xiaomie's face fell as he motioned toward Da-Bai, who was sitting on the other end of the sofa smiling goofily at 2D girls on his phone. "Da-Bai."

Bai Yu slow-wittedly lifted his head. "What's up?"

Wang Xiaomie expressionlessly looked at him. "Ask me a random question, quick!"

"Huh?" Bai Yu stared blankly at him. "Are we playing Truth or Dare?"

"Cut the nonsense and ask me already!"

"Oh, okay… Let me think, uh…" Bai Yu pointed at himself and somewhat bashfully asked, "A-am I handsome?"

Yes, say yes! Wang Xiaomie mentally repeated to himself, then somewhat nervously drew in a breath, opened his mouth, and—

"You're too dark. I can't tell."

He was stunned. *That's not what I meant to say!*

Bai Yu was also stunned. *You're lying! I'm not dark. Wehhhh, I don't believe you!*

"…Ask me another question." Wang Xiaomie buried his face in a hand. "Please."

Bai Yu muttered *You're definitely doing this on purpose* before saying after some hesitation: "Okay so, one more question for you."

"Yeah, go on, ask already."

“You told me to ask! So don’t laugh! Heh heh… What do you think of me as a person, like my personality and stuff? I recently started chatting with this girl… We often play games together! She’s got this super amazing *oneesan* voice—you know what I mean, right? She even said I was a good guy, heh heh heh.” Bai Yu blushed and wiggled shyly as he continued, “Do you think if I asked her to meet up offline, she’d say yes?”

He gazed at Wang Xiaomie with wide, hopeful eyes.

“Your personality, huh—”

“Uh-huh!”

“I think you’re not a bad guy. You could try bringing it up with her—for all you know, you might succeed.”

“Really?! Yaaay~”

Wang Xiaomie’s smiles always felt very soft, gentle, and healing. But a second later, just as Bai Yu was getting so excited he was about to leap into the air with joy, that gentle smile suddenly froze, and those lips mumbled a few words. “Is that what you thought I’d say?” Wang Xiaomie’s face paled as he said, “Idiot!”

Bai Yu was stunned silent.

“—Blockhead, idiot, moron, gullible fool. You’re a good guy, but ever since you showed up, I’ve been buying Six Walnut drinks[3] online every day. As for that oneesama voice in your game? Heh heh, you’ve gotta be joking. You think a real oneesama would be playing games on a work day? The person on the other side of the screen is definitely some jobless NEET of an overweight man, using a voice changer to trick little dunces like you, he he he he. Meeting offline? You’re already on cloud nine after someone casually called you a good guy. No doubt once you ask, he’ll say

‘yes of course, Xiao-Gege, I’ll come meet you!’—then immediately have you send him money for transportation. And after he gets your red packet, he’ll blacklist you, never to meet again!”

Wang Xiaomie, sitting cross-legged on the sofa with his chin leaning on his right hand, quirked his lips upward and tilted his head to smile, narrow-eyed, at Bai Yu. “Are you stupid or what?”

Bai Yu was silent. You could practically hear the *shnnnk* of the knife stabbing directly into his heart.

Wang Xiaomie continued, “Stupid stupid stupid…”

Bai Yu said nothing still. One knife wasn’t enough—now it was three at once. This wasn’t Truth or Dare at all; this was clearly two-faced, venomous insults! He smiled a dismal smile, then tearfully squatted in a corner to lick the wounds dealt to his pure, innocent soul.

Meanwhile, Wang Xiaomie—having regained consciousness after saying all that—held his head in both hands and buried his face into a couch cushion in despair. He’d definitely resisted whatever this was for a moment, just then! But there was suddenly a pain in his neck, and before he knew it, Wang Xiaomie started saying things he didn’t want to say aloud, as if he’d become an entirely different person.

It’s over for me… If I go out like this, won’t I get myself fucking beaten to death?!

This was definitely a curse… Wang Xiaomie rubbed his neck, rolling over and listlessly turning his head. “Don’t cry, Da-Bai…”

“Weeehhh…”

“Stop crying, you little dumbass! Go call Wen Fengjin downstairs. I’ve got something I need to tell you both. Something terrible has

happened…”

Two minutes later, Wen Fengjin sat next to Wang Xiaomie, legs crossed, the heart-shaped neckline of his casual sportswear revealing a bit of his collarbone. Bai Yu, meanwhile, sat on the opposite sofa with a blue bolster in his arms.

Both their gazes fell upon Wang Xiaomie, who was questioning his own existence, face buried in his hands.

“So what you’re saying is that you have no way to speak as tactfully as you normally do, and can only speak the truth?” Wen Fengjin frowned. “And what if you don’t speak?”

Wang Xiaomie replied, “If I don’t speak, then the feather pattern on my neck will start hurting really bad.”

“That wasn’t the truth! It was venom, total venom!” Da-Bai said, accusatory, cradling the sieve that was his injured little heart.

“You’re right, Da-Bai…” Wang Xiaomie struggled up off the sofa, looking like he had nothing left to live for. “Right now, I’ll probably send people into a rage the minute I open my mouth. Whatever comes out of my mouth always turns into something else, even when it clearly isn’t what I *wanted* to say.”

Wen Fengjin said, “So it’s saying one thing and meaning another.”

“No, it’s not quite that.” Wang Xiaomie scratched his head. “Aside from what I’m saying being a little harsher than I’d like, whatever comes out *is* actually the truth.”

Bai Yu started crying aloud at this, then went back to the corner with his bolster to lick his wounds again.

“Ai…” Wang Xiaomie let out a sigh, putting a hand over his neck. “I think the cause of all this is the feather pattern on my neck.”

Bai Yu reared his head and curiously asked, “What’s a feather pattern?”

“It’s…” Wang Xiaomie told him about the thing that had suddenly appeared on his body. The explanation left Bai Yu mystified.

“It doesn’t seem like a contagious disease,” he said. “Maybe it’s a gu,[4] like the ones they write about in legends—you know, the ones that can manipulate people and stuff.”

Wang Xiaomie’s brow furrowed at that. “I never thought of that before, but I haven’t interacted with any nonhumans, either…”

“That’s true…”

Wang Xiaomie and Bai Yu fell silent.

Wen Fengjin suddenly uncrossed his legs and said to Wang Xiaomie, “Aside from this, is there anything else?”

Wang Xiaomie was thrown off by this. “What do you mean, anything else?”

“Like…” Wen Fengjin gripped Wang Xiaomie’s chin to force eye contact, long, narrow eyes and clear, limpid ones quickly drawing close to each other. “You’ve been avoiding me all morning. I’d like a reason why.”

“I haven’t… Also you’re way too close…” At the extreme proximity of Wen Fengjin’s face, Wang Xiaomie’s gaze turned evasive, his big eyes wildly swiveling around. He was willing to look anywhere, as long as it wasn’t at Wen Fengjin.

What should he say? That this damn feather pattern carried its own “love is blind” buff? That every time he looked at Wen Fengjin now, it was like he’d gained a 100 percent beauty filter, with sparkly hearts and all?

Wang Xiaomie’s deliberate evasiveness caused Wen Fengjin’s face to darken, brow slowly furrowing as the atmosphere around them grew increasingly oppressive. Bai Yu dared not say anything careless, hugging his bolster and cautiously peeking out from behind it with puppy eyes.

“You’re hiding something from me.”

“I…am…not!”

Wen Fengjin said, “Is it because last night I…”

“Don’t bring up last night!” Wang Xiaomie pushed him away, his face bright red. He’d much rather feel a moment’s pain from a lie than say the truth. Da-Bai was right there eavesdropping, after all! If only he didn’t always have to say everything!

Wen Fengjin gripped the hand rejecting him to his chest, his face livid, only to suddenly start smiling a moment later. Those strange irises transformed into an ice-cold abyss, and the corners of his mouth rose at a sharp angle. Though Wen Fengjin’s looks were flawless, that beauty came with its own poisonous spikes. His smile filled Wang Xiaomie with both fear and an ominous sort of premonition.

When his alarm bells started ringing, Wang Xiaomie immediately turned, meaning to leap over the sofa and make a run for it—only to be stopped by an arm wrapping around his waist. The whole world seemed to spin. Silver hair brushed coolly against Wang Xiaomie’s face as he realized that he’d been thrown over Wen Fengjin’s shoulder.

Wen Fengjin narrowed his eyes, hefted Wang Xiaomie, then turned to Bai Yu with the kind of psychopathic smile you'd only see in a horror flick. "Disappear from my sight, now."

Bai Yu picked up his bolster and scurried to his room so quickly that all Wang Xiaomie saw was a fleeting glimpse of his anxious behind and the firmly shut—and locked—door.

Wang Xiaomie thought, *From this day onward, you are no longer my brother. This friendship is over.*

Putting away his smile, Wen Fengjin stepped to the bathroom with his gaze lowered. Wang Xiaomie struggled desperately on his shoulder, like a puppy whose claws couldn't yet scratch, and whose teeth had only just started to sprout. Sensing danger and feeling scared, he started kicking his legs and hammering at Wen Fengjin's back. In his desperation, he even bit Wen Fengjin through his clothes.

Wen Fengjin kept him pressed to his shoulder with one hand as the other grasped the door handle. The pain on his back made him laugh. "You can keep biting if you want. I'll let you bite your fill in a moment."

Wang Xiaomie silently let go, even reaching out to straighten the shirt he'd wrinkled with his teeth in an attempt to wipe away any proof of his crime.

"Heh."

The opened door closed once more.

The jars and bottles were all swept off the bathroom counter's marble surface, and a butt clad in matching black sportswear was dumped heavily atop it, water soaking into his clothes. A few strands of long black hair fell into the circular sink. Pale hands groped wildly around for some way to

brace themselves, slippers already gone who-knew-where from all the earlier kicking. Wang Xiaomie's toes just barely managed to graze the floor, while Wen Fengjin stood in front of the counter, keeping his legs from closing.

Wang Xiaomie looked at the not-quite-smiling Wen Fengjin, looked down at his own scrawny feet, and remembered a certain phrase.

If your shoes fell off, it's too late for you.

Chapter 56:
If Love Contained No Lies

"YOU CAN ONLY TELL the truth right now?"

"Uh-huh…"

Wen Fengjin leaned over him with lowered head, sharpened fingernails pushing at Wang Xiaomie's forehead with just enough force that he had no choice but to crane his head backward.

They locked gazes. Wen Fengjin looked like an evil dragon whose entrance came with its own BGM, while Wang Xiaomie looked like a foolish prince who wasn't even as tall as the dragon's leg.

After a moment's silence, Wen Fengjin suddenly hummed a drawn-out, lascivious "Hmmmm."

A shiver immediately ran down Wang Xiaomie's spine.

There's something wrong with anyone who says admitting your mistakes isn't positive thinking. He who understands the situation is a hero. Cowardice is the way to go!

If he said a few nice words right now, it was possible he might still be able to get out of this alive—but Wang Xiaomie had forgotten to take the feather pattern's "truth curse" into account. And so…

"I was wrong!" Wang Xiaomie said.

He then followed this up with, "But I'll do it again!"

Admitting fault one moment, but being unable to resist voicing his true feelings the next—in short, a seriously cocky move!

In response Wang Xiaomie fell silent. *Shit!* He was ready to zip up his lips at the sight of Wen Fengjin's ever-widening smile. He covered his mouth in panic, only for Wen Fengjin to easily catch both of his wrists in one hand and press them to the glass above him.

"It's time for the truth right now." Wen Fengjin leaned closer to him, their noses close enough to smell each other's scent, gazes tangling together.

Inwardly screaming that he was in serious trouble, Wang Xiaomie just told himself not to say anything weird, no matter how much it hurt. When Wen Fengjin's fingers pressed harder into his forehead, the stinging pain forced his gaze to fall into that icy abyss once more.

"If you lie by resisting the pain, I'll know," Wen Fengjin said. "This isn't a situation you can resolve with pain, so be good, okay?"

Wang Xiaomie fell silent. *Do I have any other choice?* He was distraught.

And so, in the bathroom, they began this really super-real version of Truth or Dare.

Wen Fengjin's smile didn't reach his eyes. He gazed at Wang Xiaomie the way a predator would look at its prey. "Is there something you're hiding from me in regards to the feather pattern?"

"…There is."

"What is it."

"I—get weird whenever I look at you. I really want to be close to you, and for some reason I want—"

"Want what?"

“I want to bite your neck.”

Red, moist lips pressed together for a moment before curving upward even more joyfully than before. “And what will you do if you break the skin? Would you want to drink the blood inside?”

Pale-faced, Wang Xiaomie tried to suppress the answer, but was frightened by an extremely admonishing look.

“…I would.” He didn’t know why he would have such wicked intentions. Wang Xiaomie’s suppressed hands slowly curled into fists.

“I won’t get angry.” Wen Fengjin interrupted Wang Xiaomie in his self-reproach, hand moving away from his forehead to pry the puppy’s mouth open to look at the little canine teeth inside. “Quite the opposite. I’m very much looking forward to it.”

Wang Xiaomie was speechless.

“I’m satisfied with your answer to that question. So before I ask the next one—” Wen Fengjin inclined his head to place a kiss on Wang Xiaomie’s mouth, lips pressing against each other and quickly parting again. “Good children should be given sweets as a reward.”

He raised his eyebrows, eyes glistening with light. *Boom!* Wang Xiaomie’s face turned explosively red, even his neck and the tips of his ears unable to escape their blushing fate.

Wen Fengjin, admiring the view, started taking a more ill-natured tack with his questions. “What parts of my body do you like?”

“…Face, pecs, and—” Wang Xiaomie held back for a long time but ultimately failed to suppress his answer. “And your thing.”

“Oh? Were you content with my performance yesterday?”

“…I was.”

“Did it feel good?”

“…It did.”

“Was my—”

“Could you stop saying things that’re inappropriate for children?!” A red-faced Wang Xiaomie was close to spontaneously combusting on the spot.

“All right, last question,” Wen Fengjin said. “Do you love me?”

Silence.

“I told you before not to lie. Don’t make me angry, Xiaomie; what is your answer?”

Wang Xiaomie, forced to sit on a chilly bathroom counter with both arms held down, unable to run even if he wanted to, was basically being bullied right now. You might say he was a little angry from embarrassment, or that he felt aggrieved. He sniffled once, tightly pursing his lips in silence.

Wen Fengjin kissed his lips again, this time very gently, with a hint of encouragement. “Tell me, what is your answer?”

“…I love you, okay! Are you happy now?!”

Wang Xiaomie was like a small cornered animal, completely unable to fight. He was so angry at himself that he was nearly in tears. He yelled out his answer, then gave a few crestfallen sniffles.

Wen Fengjin’s nose pressed closer to that apple-red cheek, almost able to smell the sweet, crisp scent of fruit beneath the thin skin. He straightened up, closed his eyes—already brimming with love, and containing the gentlest emotions the demon lord had ever felt in his life—

then released the other man, pressed a hand to the back of his head, and pulled him firmly into his chest.

The far-too-tranquil heart within that chest had only ever sped up for one person.

A muffled voice could be heard from within his embrace. “Scoundrel! Bastard! You’re just a huge bastard!”

Wen Fengjin, eyes still closed, faintly hummed in agreement. “And do you like that?”

Wang Xiaomie’s eyes reddened. He wanted to say no. But when he opened his mouth, what came out was, “I like it a lot.”

Aaaah! This stupid truth bug!

Wang Xiaomie broke down with a roar.

But a soft, quiet laugh sounded from above him. “I love you too. I like you more than anything.”

He said nothing.

“I like you a lot, and love you a lot.”

Still, he said nothing. *Bastard*, Wang Xiaomie grumbled internally, burrowing into his chest.

They stayed in this quiet embrace for a while.

“That’s right.” Wen Fengjin kissed the top of his head, saying, “I haven’t given you your final reward. Do you think you can do it here?”

Wang Xiaomie was immediately startled. *Reward? Reward, my ass!*

The roly-poly puppy pushed away the big gray wolf above him and scrambled to escape, only to get grabbed by the scruff of his neck and pulled back again.

“It’s a perfect chance to examine that feather pattern of yours.”

Saying this, the big gray wolf threw off his clothes in one easy movement and gave the puppy a thorough examination.

Bai Yu, having been condemned by his conscience, was about to come out of hiding to go intervene in their fight—but just when he put his hand on the door handle, he heard what sounded like a scream from Wang Xiaomie.

Bai Yu fell silent. …*Forget it. Better you than me, brother. I’ll see you again in the next life!*

Palms scraped against the tiled walls, squeaking the way flesh did on glass. Warm water swept over a pair of bodies with long, sodden black and silver hair wrapped tightly around their backs.

The water was turned off, and blue bath lotion was dribbled onto a pale white back and shoulders, slipping and sliding over the swell of a chest onto long, long strands of hair.

Wen Fengjin quirked his lips upward, placing his icy-cold hands on that skin to feel the shivers of the person beneath it. He rubbed the bath lotion over skin, making a thin layer of bubbly foam. Pressing close from behind, he pushed a certain scalding-hot area of his anatomy against a body warmed by water, massaging that narrow waist and sensitive dimples of Venus.

“Hold onto the wall.” Having said this, he didn’t wait for Wang Xiaomie to react, smiling yet not as he thrust his hips hard enough to make his partner to stumble forward a few steps and prop his arms against the steam-damp wall. Wen Fengjin closed the distance in a single step, pinning Wang Xiaomie between himself and the wall.

Wang Xiaomie opened his mouth slightly before biting down on his lower lip in an attempt to silently endure the scorching-hot thing burning his ass as Wen Fengjin's arms crossed under his armpits to rub at his soapy chest. They'd recently managed to put some baby fat on his thin body, only for it to get bitten all over the day before. Now, that flesh was getting pinched and massaged out of shape before his eyes. Sharpened fingernails covered in tiny bubbles spread them like cream over his body. Every inch of skin glowed with vitality—tight, soft, delicate, and pale. The bright-red feathering developed and spread from his left breast, the pointed tips of its shoots ending right at the curve of his face.

Deep, dark desire filled Wen Fengjin's narrow eyes at the sight of this highly contrasting image of red and white. The foamy cream that covered the red was unable to hide the pair of fleshy nubs currently getting pinched.

He pressed against Wang Xiaomie's naked back, taking advantage of his superior height to dominate the scene. His partner was slippery with soap, so Wen Fengjin upped the amount of force he was using.

Wang Xiaomie writhed slightly in pain, letting out a tiny groan. "It's really slippery here. I can't keep my footing…"

"I know," replied the man currently peppering his nape and ears with kisses.

The hot water was turned on again, washing away layer after layer of foam. Wen Fengjin lazily rested his chin against Wang Xiaomie's feather-adorned shoulder, watching as the small nubs in his hands gradually turned red and swollen.

Wang Xiaomie quietly whimpered. The rising pain and pleasure made him shift slightly against the slippery wet floor. A chilly hand coated

in slick liquid felt its way to his waist, then continued washing him, starting from his shoulder blades…

That scorching-hot organ stood erect against his waist, hair and balls rasping the crack of his buttocks.

The water finally stopped. Their dripping-wet bodies left a trail of footprints all the way to the bathroom sink, above which was a large mirror embedded in the wall. Wang Xiaomie was pressed against the countertop with his hands held behind his back. The chilly marble irritated the swollen little beans on his chest, making them hard and uncomfortable.

His image, reflected in the mirror, was flushed red, still-dripping long black hair stuck to his face. Their naked bodies lay over one another. Wen Fengjin looked in the mirror as well. When he realized Wang Xiaomie was also looking, his moist red lips curved in a smile, and Wang Xiaomie could clearly feel the blood vessels in the man’s hardened length pulsating against the skin of his ass.

Wen Fengjin was excited, just like he was… Wang Xiaomie pursed his lips in embarrassment.

Wet hair stuck to his slender neck, outlining its enchanting and beautiful arc. The blushing tips of his ears stood testament to their owner's bashfulness.

A hand lifted a sheet of black hair off a pale back as if tearing open a neatly wrapped present. With his other hand holding down Wang Xiaomie's arms, Wen Fengjin used a little of his dominating aura to make him lift his head, so that he could see the larger man lift his brows and smile in the mirror. "Do you like me?"

Wang Xiaomie's eyes reddened as he spoke with difficulty to the man in the mirror. "…I like you."

"Do you like the things I do to you?"

"…I do."

"Look straight into the mirror. You're not allowed to turn your gaze away."

Wang Xiaomie said nothing. After issuing that malicious order, the man behind him shifted to pull open the cupboard beneath the sink, quickly bringing a small bottle into his field of vision, much to his shock. "H-how did you know there was…"

"Look in the mirror." Wen Fengjin bumped hard into his buttocks as if to express his dissatisfaction.

Slap!

A burning-hot something smacked his rump. Thinking that Wen Fengjin was about to stick it in, Wang Xiaomie—who'd been completely

and thoroughly fucked just the night before—turned red as a tomato, unable to stop himself from remembering certain pornographic scenes.

But what would make him blush even harder was yet to come. Wen Fengjin pinched the tiny bottle between his fingers and gave it a little shake, smiling evilly as he asked Wang Xiaomie a question he clearly knew the answer to already. “What’s this? Hm?”

“L-lube.”

“Who bought it?”

“…I bought it.”

“How long ago did you buy it, and for what?”

Wang Xiaomie went silent. *You’re going too far, bro, you really are!*

As he kept his mouth shut in defiant silence, the feathered pattern started to burn painfully. Wen Fengjin then brought a palm to his butt with another loud *slap!* “Answer me.”

“…I bought it a long time ago, for…” Wang Xiaomie wanted nothing more than to smash his head into the sink as he said, through gritted teeth, “papapa!”

“Ohh.” Wen Fengjin drawled out his response with raised brows, smiling like the world’s biggest scoundrel as he gazed at Wang Xiaomie. He looked so evil he was practically about to burst into flames! “So you’d been looking forward to it for that long?”

Wang Xiaomie silently seethed. *So what!*

The next moment, the man said, “I’ll satisfy you.” He bent down to take one of Wang Xiaomie’s earlobes into his mouth, saying, “We’ll use up the entire bottle today, all right?”

The tip of a scarlet tongue swept across his ear. The wet voice brought with it an unbearably ticklish sensation.

Wen Fengjin released Wang Xiaomie's arms and had him brace himself against the mirror. The warmth of his hands against the clean mirror caused a white fog to spread across its surface.

He twisted open the small glass bottle, dribbling the translucent pink liquid inside onto a snowy white rump. It dripped down the tight crack in its center and slowly seeped in, perky buttocks simultaneously nervous yet expectant. That tightly shut crack was then pried open, and the mouth of the bottle was inserted into the folds of a hole that had already covertly begun to open and close.

"…Nn, it's cold…"

Wang Xiaomie bit his lip, his hole contracting hard. He could feel the pink liquid, carrying with it the scent of roses as it flowed into his passage. The cold lasted only an instant before beginning to turn into a restless and unbearable heat…

Once emptied of liquid, the bottle was tossed to the floor. The overflow spilled out of the tightly puckering orifice to wet the hair and swollen penis before it.

With that mouth now coated in glistening lubricant, Wen Fengjin glanced downward, his fingers massaging and caressing those hot, trembling folds. Before long, Wang Xiaomie was struggling to hold back his moans. When he was about to reach the limit of his endurance, Wen Fengjin finally stopped dawdling. Using the mirror, he drew glistening lines on Wang Xiaomie's cheek with his rose-scented hand. "Smell it. Doesn't it smell nice?"

Before Wang Xiaomie could say anything in reply, a few fingers crudely inserted themselves into that spot and began thrusting in and out without any preamble.

“Aah, don’t go so—*mmm*~mn—don’t touch there—”

“Stop pinching!”

“Nnnn!”

The sensation of fingernails scraping hard against his sensitive prostate sent Wang Xiaomie into a frantic struggle as the man behind him mercilessly continued to assault the spot.

Those fingers thrust and wriggled in and out, bringing long strands of lubricant out to wet his snowy white rump, until the skin looked coated in honey under the bathroom light. Wang Xiaomie’s entrance was swollen red too, his entire body stretched taut as he rubbed against the bathroom counter like a man about to die. After a mere few minutes, he ejaculated onto it.

Not waiting for him to catch his breath, Wen Fengjin ruthlessly penetrated him with such force that he stumbled against the marble countertop. Wang Xiaomie’s mouth was covered before he could even let out a scream, fingers covered in aromatic lube shoving into his mouth to grab his tongue and start playing with it.

The mirror showed Wang Xiaomie transformed by pleasure into a female cat raising its bottom and emitting its mating cry. His tearful eyes misted over in elation as he immersed himself in the pleasure of getting fucked. His tongue licked at the fingers currently imitating copulation in his mouth, while the fleshy mounds of his ass shook wildly from the force of collision. His waist was bent in an unbelievable arc, upper body leaned backward as far as it could go. His swollen nipples were wet with droplets

from the counter as they obediently accepted the weight of Wen Fengjin's fingers, while his lower half was pressed firmly against the edge of the counter as the man thrust hard into his ass, then just as roughly pulled out. At this angle, he could even clearly see the shape and color of Wen Fengjin's length. That fleshy purple, savage-looking shaft was sticky with a combination of lube and Wang Xiaomie's own slick. It made a slapping noise as it turned that delicate white bottom red under its onslaught, burying itself deep within him…

The fingers toying with his tongue left his mouth, and Wang Xiaomie was left gasping mindlessly, his head tilted back in climax and desire, black hair covering his snowy neck, his narrow waist bent so far it looked like it might break.

Fingers once more worked their way toward his wettened nipples, toying with them while Wen Fengjin pressed even closer against his back. His dangerously beautiful face displayed the lust and desire of one who wanted to ruthlessly grind the person beneath them into pieces, and assault him until he screamed out in broken tears. An open mouth bared its fangs as he bit hard into Wang Xiaomie's nape, causing blood to well up dangerously close to an artery.

That sharp pain, coupled with Wen Fengjin's teasing, caused Wang Xiaomie's eyes to widen and his pupils to contract. He knew perfectly well the reason for these actions… Like a wild beast restraining its partner to keep it from escaping as they engaged in copulation, Wang Xiaomie became the female animal about to get fucked until he bled. A second later, the man above him started up a frenzied pace, slamming quickly into his hole and its accompanying passage, causing even stickier-sounding

slapping noises to come from his rear. If it weren't for the fact his chest was reined in by Wen Fengjin's arms, he'd probably have been sent flying.

Wang Xiaomie by now had forgotten about resistance—he was going to die! It hurt! But it also felt seriously good! Extreme pleasure could be addictive. Mindless groans escaped his open mouth as he tearfully said things like "I can't take anymore" and "It's too much," over and over again. The man at his back kept silently biting down on his neck, powerfully constricting him as he dominated him, entered him…

By the time they finished, Wang Xiaomie had long forgotten how many times he'd come. All he could remember was his boneless body getting held tight by a pair of arms at the end, as the man in the mirror asked if he loved him.

He said yes, and so Wen Fengjin rewarded him once more.

After they finished one time, the question came again, and—unable to lie—he continued to answer. Each time the man would ruthlessly reward him again.

They did it many, many times. Once Wang Xiaomie's regenerative abilities became incapable of concealing his body's fatigue, he was no longer able to speak. Even the gentlest fucking caused his lower body to spill an endless amount of liquid—

That was when Wen Fengjin finally stopped asking him…

Chapter 57:
Eaten by You

WITHIN THE CASKET, a beautiful red blanket covering both their bodies, Wen Fengjin lay with one arm wrapped around the sleeping person behind him. His other hand held up a plain-looking white business card.

The white card had no name on it, nor a phone number. The only thing on it was an address.

On the back of this business card were two tiny, gilded silver words: “Eliminate Evil.”

Long, cold, slender white fingers slowly toyed with the card, making it look like a white butterfly flitting up and down, before finally coming to a stop.

Something unfamiliar surged within the depths of those dark and narrow eyes. It wasn’t until his gaze fell upon the person leaning against his shoulder that the churning tempest within those eyes finally stopped.

Wang Xiaomie, who had been toyed with so mercilessly, fell asleep the moment his head hit the pillow. His face was still flushed red, with three strands of hair lying atop his fair-skinned cheeks and lower jaw. He had nestled in so deeply that it left a small mark on his collarbone, and the blanket had already slid off his shoulder.

Wen Fengjin touched that shoulder and found it cold. As if forgetting that his partner no longer needed such things, he pulled the blanket up to cover it. He then placed a kiss on his forehead.

Wen Fengjin had already guessed a few things about the red feathers that had appeared on Wang Xiaomie's body, as well as what they were there for. The ritual refinement he'd performed was absolutely perfect. He would never allow Wang Xiaomie's body to possess any sort of flaw or blemish.

In truth, Wen Fengjin was nowhere near as calm or uncaring as he appeared on the surface. Shixiong was his. Every inch of him.

Even if the thing parasitizing his shixiong's body was just a drawing, in Wen Fengjin's eyes it was a symbol—a provocation! It was someone else's insignia, staining the body and soul that he'd taken such good and loving care of. It was as if foul-smelling fingerprints had been left upon a master artist's greatest masterpiece, a deed he was absolutely unable to abide. The beautiful feather pattern was brightly colored and resplendent, but sniffing at it left Wen Fengjin so disgusted he wanted to vomit.

Wang Xiaomie was still sound asleep as Wen Fengjin placed a palm atop his left shoulder. His expression changed from gentle to cold before gradually becoming twisted and insane. With that false skin of gentleness pulled from his face, the soul within stared with a savage fixation upon that piece of flesh, wanting nothing more than to rip it right off.

The black irises that almost entirely filled his eyes began to turn bloodred.

"I shouldn't have let him die so easily." Wen Fengjin rubbed his face against the top of Wang Xiaomie's head… "I was wrong… Do you blame me, Shixiong, for not protecting you well?"

He half closed his eyes as he talked to himself, not looking in any particular direction. Cold air descended oppressively upon them.

At this point Wang Xiaomie instinctively sensed danger and fear, and stirred in his arms with a mumble. “Xiao-Wenzi… It’s so cold…”

He muttered a few more incomprehensible words in his sleep. As if some sort of spell had been broken, the fixation and insanity disappeared like smoke. By the time Wang Xiaomie sleepily cracked open his eyes, all he saw in the dimly lit room was Wen Fengjin smiling at him as softly as ever. “Did you have a bad dream?”

“I think I did…”

“Don’t be scared. I’m here.”

“Mmhm, haaaah.” Wang Xiaomie yawned, then buried his face back in Wen Fengjin’s chest. Pressed close together like this, the warmth of that body filled him with a sense of safety. Wang Xiaomie sleepily closed his eyes.

Wen Fengjin’s smiling expression gradually faded as he looked down at that sleeping face. He was silent for a long moment, expression hidden by the darkness, before finally adjusting his position and closing his eyes as well.

But that white business card was placed right by his pillow.

The next day, Wen Fengjin pulled out that card. “We’re going to pay them a visit.”

“What’s this?” Wang Xiaomie took the card and curiously looked it over. “A business card? But why doesn’t it have a name or phone number on it? It looks kind of familiar, too.”

Bai Yu stuck his head out to look too, saying, “This is the business card that man left behind.”

“Who?”

“The guy wearing the magua and carrying Sailor Moon!”

Wang Xiaomie speechlessly looked at Wen Fengjin. “Why are we looking for *him*?” *That guy was crazy levels of weird, okay?!*

“He has a way to remove that feather pattern from your body.”

Wen Fengjin looked over at Wang Xiaomie, who widened his eyes. “Really? You’re sure?” Wasn’t this feathering a side effect of the elixir of immortality?

Wen Fengjin didn’t reply; Wang Xiaomie held the card in silence for a moment, then patted Bai Yu’s shoulder. “Da-Bai, we’re going out for a bit. Do you want to come with us?”

“I’ll go,” Bai Yu said. “Lemme go change my clothes real quick.”

“Okay.”

Wang Xiaomie gave the business card back to Wen Fengjin. He and Bai Yu each returned to their respective rooms to get changed to go out, and the three of them headed out to call a cab.

The address turned out to be near row upon row of old, narrow, small shopping streets. The driver told them that the area was filled with stalls and numerous pedestrians, so the car would be unable to get in. The group had no choice but to get out and question one shop owner after the other, following their directions to slowly find their way forward.

It took them three hours to get to the address on the card. Most of the rows of wholesale shops had showy, gaily colored signs. There was only one shop with no sign at all, only a small black flag over the door. And while the door was a swinging glass door, it had a thick black film stuck

over it, like the kind you saw on car windows. From the outside, it was impossible to make out what the inside was like.

The street was noisy and packed with people, filled with stalls selling sundry goods. This little shop without a single visitor stood out as much as Wen Fengjin did in a crowd. Passersby kept sneakily looking over at the three of them, most of their gazes staying on Wen Fengjin and Wang Xiaomie.

“Is this the place?” Wang Xiaomie didn’t quite dare to confirm it.

Bai Yu scratched his head. “A business card with no name *is* pretty similar to a shop with no sign, but I can’t say for sure, either—maybe they’re just an average sundry seller?”

The two of them debated if they should go up to the door and ask. But the moment Wang Xiaomie raised his head, he found that Wen Fengjin had already pulled the door open and stepped inside. Wang Xiaomie hurriedly tugged at Bai Yu to follow him.

When all three of them had stepped inside, the small black flag at the door gently unfurled in the wind to reveal a slim but sturdily written calligraphic character…

Upon passing through the door, they discovered that the only things in the sitting room that greeted them were an old wooden counter, a few sofas, and a small tea table. Wang Xiaomie saw a tea tray like one his grandmother used to have sitting on the tea table, all white with red borders and ‘joy’ printed on it with a large character.

A magua, a braid, Sailor Moon, and now these antique furnishings… Wang Xiaomie felt as if his sense of aesthetics had taken a huge shock. He

looked back at Bai Yu to find that Bai Yu had the exact same look on his face.

The black film on the door kept any light from entering, so the rafters were hung with lamps. The warm yellow light of the lamps cast a time-worn sepia filter across the old-fashioned sitting room, as if stepping through that door had taken you back in time.

Modestly sized picture frames were hung all over the walls. Having entered ahead of them, Wen Fengjin stood in front of the wall across from the door, expressionlessly studying the picture frames in front of him. Wang Xiaomie walked quickly to his side and frowned in some confusion. “You’ve been acting kind of weird today—what are you looking at?”

When he followed Wen Fengjin’s line of sight, his eyes slowly widened upon seeing the people in the picture.

“What’s up with you two? Why’re you acting like you’re frozen to the spot?” Bai Yu came over and patted Wang Xiaomie’s shoulder with a laugh, seeing how they stared transfixed at that picture. “Isn’t it just a picture? What’s wrong?”

There was silence, then:

“…Zhen Bei and Yan Chun?!” Wang Xiaomie exclaimed in disbelief.

That picture on the wall was indeed a photo of three men: the man they saw before, Zhen Bei, and Yan Chun!

That man knew Yan Chun and Zhen Bei!

“I see that my guests are quite fond of my photos,” a man’s smiling voice suddenly said.

Wang Xiaomie nearly puffed up like a spooked cat. Bai Yu was also shocked. Wen Fengjin expressionlessly stepped in front of Wang Xiaomie to shield him, his narrow, inhuman eyes focused directly on the man who'd appeared by the counter. "You did this on purpose."

"What do you mean? I'm not sure I understand."

The man tilted his head. His braid—more white than black—was neatly tied behind his head, and his pale green magua made him blend into the old-fashioned scenery around him. He looked like the eldest son of a prominent family of literati from the '60s or '70s, or a mild-mannered schoolteacher.

Wen Fengjin narrowed his eyes, and an explosive burst of power blasted through the room.

Bai Yu's head jolted as if it'd been struck a staggering blow, leaving him dizzy with a dull pain in his chest; he opened his mouth with the urge to vomit. Wang Xiaomie hurriedly pulled Bai Yu to his side, and he felt much better once he'd taken cover behind Wen Fengjin.

Given Bai Yu's discomfort from just standing somewhat nearby, there was no need to guess how the man directly facing Wen Fengjin felt. His smile froze and he took a few steps back, his narrow eyes fixated on Wen Fengjin.

"Why are you so angry, sir? You and the one behind you seem like humans. Yet you are not. Likewise, you are like jiangshi, yet not. Such a small business as this one cannot afford to offend the two of you. If something displeases you, all you need do is speak."

"So you're feigning ignorance?" Wen Fengjin's gaze was ice-cold as he sneered, "If you recognize Yan Chun, then you know perfectly well who

the feather pattern belongs to. Can you really claim not to know about Yan Chun's fate, now that this feather pattern has moved onto my shixiong's body?"

The feather pattern used to be Yan Chun's?! Behind Wen Fengjin, Wang Xiaomie curled his hands into fists. But before he could finish processing the shock, the man across from them spoke up…

"Ah, so you're angry because of my previous clients." The smiling man in the magua cupped his hands inside his sleeves as he looked at the group picture on the wall. "I'm not particularly familiar with those two. Our relationship was strictly business. I always take a photo with my clients, then hang the picture on the wall. The people in all the pictures on these walls are clients with whom I've done business. I am familiar with that feather pattern. It did indeed belong to my previous client, and he was indeed named Yan Chun…but that all happened a long, long time ago. So there's really no need for you to be like this—after all, aside from me, there may not be anyone else who knows what that pattern is."

After saying all this, he raised his cupped hands in slight obeisance, his smile a very genuine one.

Wen Fengjin's smile didn't reach his eyes, nor did he speak. But the powerful aura of domination given to him by the elixir of immortality went away.

Wang Xiaomie cautiously poked his head out from behind Wen Fengjin, somewhat taken aback by how calm the man managed to be in the face of Wen Fengjin's aura. Upon taking a closer look, he saw sweat dripping from the man's temples and understood. It wasn't that he had a

way to resist that indescribable power of Wen Fengjin's—he was just stubbornly holding his ground. Wang Xiaomie kind of admired him for that.

The man also caught sight of Wang Xiaomie's surreptitiously peeking head. The smile on his face deepened in response.

"However…" he said, "…that feather pattern is a thing that is cultivated within the heart, and has many uses. If it leaves, its host will die. Very few can extract it without issue, let alone transplant it onto another. For it to appear so completely upon the person behind you… I can more or less guess what happened to Yan Chun."

The man appeared to be addressing Wen Fengjin, but in reality, he was looking at Wang Xiaomie. He drawled out his words, his narrow eyes curving in a smile.

"Did you happen to eat Yan Chun? My most *esteemed* customer."

Chapter 58:
Yi Yan

Y*AN CHUN—*

He was eaten by you, dear sir—

The narrow-eyed magua man's eyes and mouth were both curved in a smile. In that moment it seemed as if countless spotlights had turned to focus on him, with creepy background music and everything.

The air turned restless and the red feather pattern burned hot. That strange, uncontrollable sensation welled up again, and a dumbfounded Wang Xiaomie opened his mouth slightly. After a moment of silence, he raised himself up on his toes to gently and cutely rest his chin upon Wen Fengjin's shoulder. He looked over to meet the man's gaze.

"Mmhm, I ate him." Those clear eyes lacked the slightest hint of cloudiness as he said, "He was really tasty, too." *So what're you gonna do about it? Just circle around my little Wenzi and bite me! If you've got the balls, open those damn squinty eyes of your and then we'll talk!*

The man was momentarily stunned by this unexpected answer, but quickly donned an even deeper smile than before. "…My eyes didn't deceive me after all," he muttered to himself. "You really *are* the best."

It was unclear whether or not Wen Fengjin had heard what he'd said. He probably did, because he had the ugliest look on his face, and used a large hand to press that inquisitive little head back down again.

If the man across from them didn't still have some worth to Boss Wen, they'd probably be seeing his specialty headshot technique again

today.

“Now, it won’t do for us all to just keep standing here. If you’re here about the feather pattern, then why don’t we go upstairs to sit?” The man cupped his hands toward them, smiling happily as he turned to walk over to the counter, behind which was a door.

He opened the door, turned his head with a smile to motion them over, then said as he headed inside, “By the way, you can all just call me Yi Yan, or shopkeep, as I’m the only one running this shop. Heh heh. I’m just an honest businessman.”

Wen Fengjin’s response to these words was a derisive laugh.

Yi Yan’s pale-green magua disappeared through the door, and Wen Fengjin turned to give Wang Xiaomie a look before following after him.

Wang Xiaomie pursed his lips. To tell the truth, what he’d said just now had scared him as well. All this time, he’d been actively ignoring the fact that he’d eaten that piece of heart. He never wanted to hurt anyone, let alone eat them. Even if the person in question had already become an inhuman monster…

The feather pattern compelled him to tell the truth. Did this mean that, deep down, he really thought that bitterly medicinal piece of flesh had been so delicious?

Had it been disgusting? He couldn’t quite say that, either.

This was probably the first time he had to truly face the fact that he was no longer human.

Wang Xiaomie’s ugly expression and dispirited mood didn’t last long, because he turned around to find Bai Yu already turned to stone, his eyes a total blank. “Y-y-y-you really *do* eat people!”

The sight of Bai Yu crying up a whirlwind of tears led Wang Xiaomie to suddenly laugh. “That’s right!” He purposely put on a psychopathic smile, baring a mouthful of little white teeth. “I’m a man-eater!”

Bai Yu thought: *I-I just wet my pants a little.*

Wang Xiaomie laughed. “Ha ha ha ha!”

“Weehhhhh—”

Scaring people is actually a lot of fun.… Wang Xiaomie felt like he’d suddenly opened the door to a brand-new world.

Behind the door was a staircase with iron railings and peeling paint, dimly lit by yellow lights. The steps thumped dully when you walked up them. Once they reached the second floor, they found that the upstairs space had been partitioned into many tiny spaces by cloths similar to the privacy curtains you’d find in hospitals. There were gaps in these curtains, through which they could see iron-frame beds. It all gave off the vibe of an unknown back-alley clinic.

Cabinets lined the wall by the stairs, within which were row upon row of grotesque-looking ingredients in sealed glass containers. Bai Yu’s attention was glued to those rows of ingredients so hard that you could almost hear the smack of his eyeballs against the glass. A bunch of strange names wildly flew from his mouth, as though he were Xuanzang reciting the Incantation of the Golden Hoop. And he was staring so covetously that he was practically drooling!

Wang Xiaomie guessed that these must be valuable materials Artisans used to make things. Being able to line a whole wall with them was as good as putting up a sign that said “rich” in huge capital letters.

As they passed by one of the partitioned-off iron-frame beds, Wang Xiaomie and Wen Fengjin caught sight of a heavy plastic sheet, upon which was a pile of thoroughly cooked pieces of meat, a knife, and a jumble of various tools tossed onto a tray. Next to that lay defleshed bones…

"They're human." With these indifferent words, Wen Fengjin lifted the curtain.

Wang Xiaomie broke out in a cold sweat as he looked at the pile. *An honest businessman? There's no heckin' way you're an honest businessman!*

"Oh, that? That's what I was working on just a moment ago—I need to sort the bones and assemble them as a skeleton. It's a commission from the nearby medical school." Yi Yan sat behind an office desk at the end of the partitioned-off area, smiling cheerfully as he gave this explanation. Whether it was true or false was all a matter of opinion.

"Come, please sit down." Yi Yan motioned for them to sit in the nearby seats. Wen Fengjin and Wang Xiaomie sat down, but Bai Yu was still sprawled against the cabinets, drooling as he gazed at their contents.

Yi Yan said, "The feather pattern belonged to Yan Chun; this you already know. But that pattern wasn't on Yan Chun's body to start with. It's an extraordinary object… I'm sure it's made a deep impression on you, and has proved convenient in certain ways."

Convenient, my ass! Wang Xiaomie was just about to complain when next to him, Wen Fengjin went silent for a moment, thought of something, and unexpectedly nodded.

Wang Xiaomie blinked. *What're you thinking of?! Don't get any weird ideas!*

“In regards to particulars, allow me to give you a full explanation,” Yi Yan smilingly said. “I met the man named Yan Chun twenty years ago.”

Twenty years ago?!

Both Wang Xiaomie and Bai Yu, standing a short distance away, turned to stare at him with dumbfounded looks on their faces. “How…how old are you?”

Yi Yan, who looked barely thirty at most, smiled as he straightened out the wrinkles in his sleeves. “Something like age cannot be judged by appearance alone. So it is with women, and just the same with men. Both of your ages are likely far more unbelievable than mine, good sirs.”

Wen “1300+ year-old living antique” Fengjin and Wang “living fossil who slept for 1300+ years” Xiaomie were silent at that.

“Back then, I met him on a mountain in a certain place. He was a very interesting man. All the blood in his body emanated the enviable aroma of treasure, and yet his soul was so twisted as to make you nauseous.” Yi Yan smiled as he continued, “That man was no human, and something inhuman does not deserve to live using a human form. So to be honest, I planned to kill him then.

“But I let him live, in light of the uses I could have for his valuable blood. He was really quite weak back then, his body unable to control such great power. His flesh continually crumbled and fell away, then grew back anew… Hardly a good match. Even now, I can’t help but wonder why I didn’t dispose of a thing like that.”

Yi Yan leaned his elbows against the desk and laced his fingers, resting his chin atop his hands. Beneath the warm light of the lamp, that face held a sedate gentleness detached from age, which could only be

gained from the accumulation of years. But the words coming out of his mouth could send shivers down your spine.

“My whole life, I’ve walked the path of refining tools and dealing with inhuman monsters. Every individual has something they’d willingly dedicate their life to accomplishing.”

His gaze swept over Wen Fengjin before fixing on Wang Xiaomie. There was something hidden in his eyes for a moment before it disappeared in a flash.

“…Due to my appreciation and need for his blood, he became my customer at that time. That feather pattern is actually a special creation of mine, using Yan Chun’s blood, in order to stabilize his body and help him control the power within it.”

“You made the feather pattern?!”

“That’s right. Because the feather pattern was designed to help that good-for-nothing… Ah, it isn’t very polite of me to speak of a customer that way, ha ha.” Yi Yan waved a hand dismissively. “It has a devouring nature brought about by the blood in your bodies, but its basic abilities won’t change after the transference.”

He then said to Wang Xiaomie, “Your body is entirely able to bear its power, so you have no need for the feather pattern. Its devouring nature will instead steal your life while it strengthens itself.

“But both your energy and that which was in Yan Chun’s body came from this customer beside you. As far as the feather pattern is concerned, this one is equivalent to a piece of delicious cake. If you don’t deal with the pattern, and don’t want it to hurt your body, then your only option is to rely on the blood of the customer beside you, and drink it often as if it were

medicine. In fact, now that it's moved to a new host, even I have no idea if it might one day completely manipulate you into devouring him. Just as you devoured Yan Chun…"

Wang Xiaomie froze in blank shock, then looked at Wen Fengjin beside him, unable to stop himself from sinking into thought… *So the filter I've been looking at Wen Fengjin with isn't actually "beauty in the eyes of a lover," it's "fried chicken in the eyes of a foodie"?! What the fuck? Is that what I was thinking all this time?!*

"Would you be willing to tell me what other effects the feather pattern has produced?" Yi Yan curiously asked Wen Fengjin.

Wen Fengjin provided a summary of the changes brought about by the feather pattern's growth, after which Yi Yan closed his eyes and meditated on it for a moment—not that Wang Xiaomie could see a difference whether his eyes were open or closed.

"This is something of a problem." Yi Yan stood up with a sigh, hiding his hands in his sleeves as he walked to one of the iron-frame beds off to the side. "Come on then. Lie down here and I'll see if I can strip it off."

Yi Yan wore a worried look on his face, but Wang Xiaomie's sharp eyes caught sight of the excited shine hidden in those narrow eyes—as if, despite all that talk, this had been his true goal all along! Just the sight of the tray of surgical tools on top of the iron-frame bed made Wang Xiaomie's bones start to hurt. "Strip it off… How're you gonna do that?"

Yi Yan smiled. "Do you even need to ask? Through dissection, of course~ Ha ha ha, don't be afraid. I'm an extremely professional Artisan, and a licensed doctor from S Province Medical School at that. Though my degree was in medical law, ha ha. My tools and anesthetics are all imported

as well. I'll get on the phone right now and call my assistant to come over. Hm…where on your body should I begin my investigations?"

"If you're stripping off the pattern, then would you need to start from anywhere else?!" Wang Xiaomie's eyes widened as he yelled, "This really is a back-alley clinic. I'm going to report you! Xiao-Wenzi, I don't wanna lie down there!"

Wen Fengjin slightly furrowed his brow. He did want the feather pattern removed, but he equally disliked the man before him. Not to mention the idea of letting anyone else use a blade to lacerate his shixiong's skin…

Meanwhile, Yi Yan had already started to press them. "Quickly now, quickly!" He patted the bed. That combination of his impatience and his coaxing tone made him sound like a mad scientist escaped from the local mental hospital. "Hurry up and lie down. I'll take you apart and perfectly strip off the feather pattern. I'm the one who created it, after all~ Don't worry, there's nothing to be afraid of."

Wang Xiaomie was silent.

Yi Yan tilted his head. "What's wrong? Why are you still not lying down?"

Wang Xiaomie said nothing for a moment more, then turned to Wen Fengjin and said, "Hubby."

Wen Fengjin grunted. "Mn."

"Beat him!"

Silence fell.

Chapter 59:
A Monster Who Doesn’t Need to Try

IF A CORPSE HAD A SOUL, could it feel pain?

Wang Xiaomie didn’t have a clear answer for this. He didn’t know if he counted as a jiangshi, or if he was more like the living dead. He could feel warmth and could eat normal food, and he had human emotions and a soul, but at the same time, he also knew the changes he had gone through… setting aside his newfound strength and the other things his body was capable of right now.

Part of his emotional landscape was currently deteriorating—the part containing emotions that could feel admiration or fear for objects and living things. For example, a normal person who encountered a ruthless and terrible evildoer—or a corpse or something—would feel great panic and fear. Wang Xiaomie, on the other hand, would be much calmer. He still felt fear, but to a much smaller extent.

Perhaps it was brought about by the changes in his body, or perhaps he’d been influenced by the memories of his past life. After all, that past life was spent in an era where neither life nor honor had any value.

Wang Xiaomie lay shirtless on the icy-cold iron-frame bed, but there was a cloth covering him from the chest down. The anesthetic wasn’t particularly effective—a badly bruised Yi Yan had smilingly pulled a small incense burner from a cabinet. Pale purple smoke curled upward from its many holes, climbing into the air at an extremely slow speed.

Wen Fengjin held his breath with a frown, lifting his head to look over at the other man. “I’m surprised you’d have this.”

“This is my line of business, after all—I’m bound to pick up a few good things over time.” Yi Yan pulled out a cloth soaked in some sort of liquid and wrapped it around his nose and mouth, smiling like a fox spirit when he heard Wen Fengjin’s comment. “Though the use of this comes with a cost we’ll discuss later, and it won’t be a small sum. I’m sure you understand, considering how valuable this item is.”

“Mm.” Wen Fengjin calmly replied, “Use as much as you need.” He had mountains of treasure in his mausoleum—treasures that many people spent their lives desperately searching for were to him as common as hairs on a cow, which was exactly why so many were so obsessed with the mausoleum.

Yi Yan’s narrow eyes curved in a sharp smile. “I should have expected no less of you. It looks like I’ll be making quite a profit today.”

Wen Fengjin ignored him and bent his tall and slender body over the bed, causing his long silver hair to slide down his back and fall onto Wang Xiaomie’s stomach. His cold and arrogant expression covered a faint hint of tenderness as he looked down at Wang Xiaomie and asked, “Are you scared?”

Wang Xiaomie pursed his lips and shook his head.

An ice-cold hand covered his cheek, a thumb pressed down on his lower lip, and he made eye contact with Wen Fengjin. “Speak.”

“I’m a little scared.” Wang Xiaomie sniffed and gazed anxiously up at him.

Wen Fengjin let out a low laugh. “Then I’ll stand right here so you can look at me, okay? Hm?”

“Okay.”

Wang Xiaomie smelled the sweet fragrance tickling his nose. It was a mystery what was producing that smoke, but while even anesthetic barely had any effect on him, he now found himself starting to feel sleepy. There was no pain in his head, and even the feeling of Wen Fengjin’s palm stroking his cheek disappeared.

He couldn’t say he was very frightened, but it would be a lie to say he wasn’t scared at all, either. He’d never even had so much as an appendectomy growing up, and while he’d certainly gotten his fair share of injuries after transmigrating to ancient times, could you really compare that with getting held down in a back-alley clinic while some weirdo used knives on you?!

The truth was that he simply didn’t trust Yi Yan. There were some people out there you could take one look at and just know: “This guy’s not my type.” Wang Xiaomie kept feeling there was something off about Yi Yan. The man lived in graceful independence, and yet was both ruthless and decisive. The moment someone like this fixed their mind on a belief, it no longer mattered how hard you tried to reach them. They’d very politely pour you tea and kindly listen to everything you said, then turn around and continue acting according to their own whims.

To put it simply, this was a very troublesome kind of person.

Seeing that Wang Xiaomie was no longer able to speak, Wen Fengjin nodded to Yi Yan and said, “It’s fine now.”

Yi Yan then turned to a silent girl standing behind him and said, “We can start now.”

The girl behind him was the Sailor Scout they’d seen previously, though she was wearing a clean skirt today, and her hair was dyed black, making her look like a cute little middle schooler about to take her first steps into high school. Yi Yan had called her on the phone and asked her to come over. Wang Xiaomie curiously wondered what the deal was with this little girl and Yi Yan, but hadn’t had the nerve to ask. At Yi Yan’s words, the girl picked up the tray without any fuss and quietly began setting out various tools for the operation. She looked extremely practiced and professional.

Wang Xiaomie was getting sleepier and sleepier as he stared at Wen Fengjin. Finally, he couldn’t stop himself from closing his eyes. Before falling asleep, he heard Bai Yu outside the partitioned-off area, raising his voice to cheer him on.

A surgical light glared down from overhead, rendering the already fair skin of the person on the bed even more pallid than usual. Wang Xiaomie’s eyes were closed, his lashes casting tiny shadows across his face. Wen Fengjin stood in the same spot as before, holding the other man’s dangling hand as he quietly gazed at his face.

Yi Yan’s narrow-eyed gaze swept over to him, smile deepening at the corners of his mouth, before he turned to take a bottle of translucent medicinal liquid from the tray in the girl’s hands. He tilted the glass bottle downward, its pointed cap dripping a few drops of liquid onto Wang Xiaomie’s exposed left breast.

All that talk about dissection earlier was just Yi Yan teasing Wang Xiaomie. Removing the feather pattern was actually incredibly easy—or at least, it was before the pattern took up a second host. The instant those few drops of colorless, tasteless liquid seeped into the surface of his pale skin, a wide bloodred patch suddenly spread across it as the feather pattern wildly grew in huge swaths, surging forth as if suffering some sort of reaction.

More and more bottles came out, and more and more medicines were dripped onto the skin. The red marks that had previously grown only on Wang Xiaomie's skin now poked their heads above the surface, popping out of his skin like threads or poisonous insects. The medicine made the pattern twist back and forth, swaying like a drunken man.

"Oh my, this is even more severe than I imagined." Yi Yan stared blankly for a moment before saying, with a hint of profoundness, "It appears this body is indeed far more suitable for this little thing than Yan Chun was. Look, it's nearly grown to reach his cheeks."

His tone made him sound like he was talking about a relative's overweight child, gentle yet exasperated. Dark pupils reflected that bloodred swath. Wen Fengjin's eyes made no effort to hide his disgust.

Yi Yan gently placed his fingers on those red threads. "Do you dislike it that much? This is actually one of my more splendid masterpieces."

"Remove it."

Wen Fengjin stared at Yi Yan. Yi Yan stared back at Wen Fengjin.

"…Even the atmosphere has changed." Yi Yan snorted a laugh. "I see that calling him a 'collector's item' isn't accurate at all. I have never before met such a perfect example of ritual refinement! Whether in body or mind, there's barely any difference between him and a human being. He is that

most perfect work of art that I've been pursuing all this time. This child by my side was my creation as well."

He patted the girl's head as she stood there, expressionless, still holding her tray. "I used only the most valuable materials, and invested many years of painstaking effort into creating humanoid life, thinking that my technical skills had already surpassed all other Artisans of my level… until the day I met this companion of yours… It seems that the soul really is the key…"

He continued, "Would you mind giving him to me, or letting me borrow him to research—*urk*—"

Chapter 60:
What Did You Say?!

THERE WAS A LIGHT RAIN the day they returned. The purple smoke Yi Yan had used was pretty strong, as Wang Xiaomie didn't wake until the middle of the night.

The first thing he did upon waking up was to pull open his clothes and take a look at his chest.

Beside him, Wen Fengjin quietly sat up as well.

His fair-skinned chest was as clean as tofu, aside from the new addition of a tiny red mole.

While he couldn't normally see the feather pattern, Wang Xiaomie could sense that it really was gone. He decided to try saying something untrue just to confirm it. But what to say?

After a moment's thought, he whispered into the empty air, "Bai Yu is a real fair-skinned guy."

A minute later, a pain-free Wang Xiaomie's eyes lit up like a pair of lightbulbs in the dark night. "Xiao-Wenzi, Xiao-Wenzi! Look, that thing on my body's gone!" He excitedly turned on the nightlight beside the casket, then pulled open his collar and shifted closer for Wen Fengjin to see. "Look! It's gone!"

There was still a hint of lethargy on Wen Fengjin's face. The warm light cast a shadow on his handsome features that made his eyes look very deep-set, and darker than ever. He combed back a mess of silver hair with one hand, then leaned his head toward Wang Xiaomie's chest.

“How’s it look? It’s gone, right?” Wang Xiaomie was beside himself with joy now that that accursed thing was gone. His face slightly reddened by his excitement, he completely failed to notice that Wen Fengjin’s nose was a lot closer than it should be, blowing faint puffs of icy air onto his chest.

And it was still getting closer. Closer and closer… Closer and closer…

A few seconds later, Wang Xiaomie’s entire body suddenly trembled, and he looked blankly down at that silver-haired head. It was only now that he noticed that Wen Fengjin had two hair whorls. Old folks always said that one whorl was good and two was bad.

…The ancients were absolutely right.

Wang Xiaomie’s happy expression gradually disappeared. He raised a hand to mete out a vicious slap, only for Wen Fengjin to chuckle as he made his timely retreat, his already plump lips now shinier than before.

“I’ll get you for this, you hooligan!” A red-faced Wang Xiaomie threw himself forward and started play-fighting with Wen Fengjin in the casket. Or more simply, it was a one-sided routing of Wen Fengjin. A smile at the corner of his lips, he wrapped his arms around Wang Xiaomie as he let him bite and hammer away.

After going at it for a good long while, a dog-tired Wang Xiaomie realized that Wen Fengjin was treating this insignificant pain as nothing more than a little fun.

He fell silent. He was angry, and yet there was nothing he could do about it.

Wang Xiaomie climbed out of the casket in a huff, deciding to go make something to eat.

“Where are you going, hm?”

An arm reached out from behind to wrap around him as Wen Fengjin’s deep voice reached his ears. “Are you angry?”

“I’m not. Let go. I’m starving—I’m going to go make something to eat!” Wang Xiaomie slapped at his arm, but Wen Fengjin was so strong that he couldn’t get away, no matter how much he struggled.

At his words, Wen Fengjin finally let him go. Wang Xiaomie rolled out of the casket, flipped a big middle finger to Wen Fengjin—who was just about to get up and follow him—then made a quick escape before Boss Wen could grab him for a spanking.

Behind him, Wen Fengjin laughed softly. The sound sent a chill down Wang Xiaomie’s back, nearly making him miss a step on the way down the stairs and crash face-first to the bottom.

As he was passing by the sofa on the way to the kitchen, he suddenly heard a faint voice. “…Are you going to cook?”

Wang Xiaomie nearly leapt three feet into the air in fright. “Fuck, a ghost!”

“Are you going to cook…?” The feeble voice was still speaking.

Next, their sofa started making a sound like rustling cloth, and a white shirt hung frighteningly in the air. In that moment, Wang Xiaomie discovered that his sluggish heartbeat had unexpectedly found the day that it could go at lightspeed.

The room abruptly lit up. Wen Fengjin, hearing Wang Xiaomie scream, had hurried downstairs with a frown to turn on the lights. Wang Xiaomie finally got a clear look at the situation. What floating shirt? That was clearly Bai Yu standing in front of him, dressed in white!

Wang Xiaomie put a hand to his chest as he said, "…Bro, I'm serious, you've really gotta get your skin whitened. I'll pay the costs—go buy some face masks to use."

"…Are you going to cook?" Bai Yu pinned Wang Xiaomie with a hollow-eyed gaze as he repeated the same line.

Wang Xiaomie nodded, and Bai Yu's eyes immediately welled up with tears. "Dage, please hurry up and cook something! I'm hungry too! I'm starving to death! Our fridge has nothing but raw ingredients in it, nobody does delivery at this time of night, and the few who do have a crazy high delivery fee! Weehhhhh, I've practically eaten all of the fruit already."

Having missed both lunch and dinner, Bai Yu—who was a big eater to begin with—had suffered so greatly in his hunger that he could practically feel his stomach filling with acid. He was the kind of person who'd blow up the kitchen if he tried to cook. The only thing he could make was a boiled egg. But Boss Wen didn't eat anything after coming home, Bai Yu didn't have the guts to eat a meal alone, and Wen Fengjin had also given him a strict warning not to go upstairs. Lacking much in the way of brains to begin with, a tearful Bai Yu had sat down on the sofa and tried to fend off his hunger with grapes while helplessly debating whether or not to go upstairs to call Wen Fengjin. He ended up sitting like this all the way into the middle of the night…

After he listened to Bai Yu's blubbering complaint, Wang Xiaomie's mouth twitched, and he gave him a pat on the shoulder. He could feel himself welling up with that particular sort of fatherly love called "I have a stupid son." "Clean up the fruit skins on the table. I'll go make dinner." Wang Xiaomie looked over at Wen Fengjin and said, "Fengjin, do you want some?"

Wen Fengjin, leaning against the wall with folded arms, gave a slight nod.

"Okay." Wang Xiaomie sighed. "You two wait a bit. I'll whip up something tasty for everyone in just a minute!"

Bai Yu whooped with joy, shouting, "You're my second parent, Xiaomie!"

"Don't!" Wang Xiaomie had terror written all over his face. "I could never give birth to a son like you!"

My heart's broken, Bai Yu thought.

Upon reaching the kitchen, Wang Xiaomie opened the fridge and pulled out a pile of ingredients. To celebrate… Okay, fine, so he couldn't think of anything in particular to celebrate. But there were always a hundred different ways for a glutton to celebrate tasty food. Wang Xiaomie openly began to do the one thing forbidden in online social circles: cook up a whole bunch of dishes. As he was putting the pot on to boil, a drooling Bai Yu came, following the aroma, to cling to the kitchen doorway and peek inside. His longing gaze made Wang Xiaomie laugh.

Finally, almost an hour later, all the plates were brought out onto the table. Wang Xiaomie was fond of strong flavors—spicy, sour, salty, any sort

of stimulation was good. Most modern youths tended to share his tastes, and Bai Yu was no exception.

But Wen Fengjin didn't like onions, ginger, garlic, or anything else that left an aftertaste in your mouth long after you'd eaten it, nor did he like overly greasy or salty foods. So Wang Xiaomie had chosen to be a little extravagant and made two of everything: one big serving, and one small serving. The big one was for Wang Xiaomie and Bai Yu; the small one was for Wen Fengjin.

Bai Yu found himself a small, cherry-colored glass basin and filled it with rice, his eyes reddening as he picked up his chopsticks and started shoveling food into his mouth. He even found the time to give Wang Xiaomie a thumbs-up as he ate. *Like!* He ate extremely happily, his dark face filled with emotion. One might have imagined tiny flowers sprouting above his head.

To tell the truth, Wang Xiaomie felt a sense of fulfillment whenever he watched Bai Yu eat. It made him able to even eat a little more than usual himself. With such a food-guzzling being in his presence, he picked up his own chopsticks and started stuffing his mouth as well.

Of the three of them, Wen Fengjin was the only one with proper table manners. Even the way he held his chopsticks radiated a composed yet deliberate bearing. The scene resembled a leader and two little piggies sitting around the same table to eat.

Once they'd eaten their fill, Wang Xiaomie leaned lazily against Wen Fengjin, while Bai Yu sat on the sofa across from them, contentedly rubbing his belly.

Wen Fengjin and Wang Xiaomie could get by without sleep, and Bai Yu tended to play with his phone or mess around with his research until midnight anyway. With everyone awake while their digestive systems got to work, Wang Xiaomie went to the fridge and got out three popsicles—Bai Yu having eaten all the fruit, leaving popsicles as the only after-dinner treat.

So the three of them opened the French window, sat on the little ledge in front of it, and started sucking on popsicles as they gazed up at the moon.

The moon was silent.

The night breeze after the rain was quite refreshing. Naturally, Wen Fengjin couldn't do something like lick a popsicle—or even if he could, he'd do it where nobody could see, or maybe just in front of Wang Xiaomie… *Ahem*. The point was, Wen Fengjin frowned and finished the popsicle in a few bites, leaving Wang Xiaomie to lean against his shoulder as he slowly licked his own. He even dripped a bit onto Boss Wen's arm, though luckily, he didn't get in trouble for it. The two of them whispered quietly to each other, Wang Xiaomie occasionally chuckling at something he said, while Wen Fengjin had no real expression on his face at all.

The atmosphere was lovey-dovey enough to drown a man to death. Bai Yu sucked on his popsicle, taking friendly fire from the rain of dog food. He almost wanted to whine to the moon, "This regret is eternal and endless."

Once they finished sucking on their popsicles, Bai Yu held out his popsicle stick and sighed, "Ai, thanks for your patronage again."

"You should know how dark your face is just from looking in a mirror," Wang Xiaomie sincerely advised him. "If you want to free yourself from all your bad luck, you really should buy a few face masks."

"…What you're saying kind of makes sense." Bai Yu quietly nodded as he said, "But here's the problem—who's paying for the face masks?"

"Obviously, the organization pays for it!" Wang Xiaomie patted his shoulder, saying, "Don't you worry! I'll put down an order for two boxes of the best face masks I can find today!"

Bai Yu was so moved that tears welled up in his eyes. "Dage~"

Wang Xiaomie gripped his hands. "Erdi!"

From the sidelines, Wen Fengjin watched them act like fools, flabbergasted.

"Ahem." Boss Wen put on a serious expression. "Hands!"

Wang Xiaomie and Bai Yu's faces paled as they hurriedly separated. They were both quite terrified of Wen Fengjin. Wang Xiaomie immediately thrust his hand back into Wen Fengjin's while Bai Yu timidly gripped his popsicle stick, not daring to mess around anymore.

At this point, Wen Fengjin suddenly said to Bai Yu, "Tomorrow, I'll give you a box, which you'll take down to Yi Yan. Tell him it's his payment."

Bai Yu, never having expected to be tasked with being a gopher for Boss Wen, froze up for a moment before quickly and happily nodding in acquiescence. He'd barely exchanged a few words with Boss Wen since coming here, and secretly held a great admiration for someone who seemed so powerful.

Besides, being able to help other people—even if it was just a small errand—gave Bai Yu a tiny sense of fulfillment as well. This was probably what it meant to be a good person… Bai Yu, playing at being profound, turned to the moon and sighed with great feeling. *I really am just too*

amazing and perfect. How could the world have a man as great as me in it? Heh heh…

After sitting around for about another half hour, Bai Yu got tired. He said goodnight to Wang Xiaomie and Wen Fengjin and headed to his room to sleep.

“How about we go sleep too?” Wang Xiaomie asked Wen Fengjin.

Wen Fengjin hummed in agreement but didn’t get up, instead lifting his head to look at Wang Xiaomie. The moonlight adorned his dark eyes with glimmers of light. The way his silver hair wound magnificently under the cold light was lovely.

The pretty man who looked down upon the world was smiling, stunning the moon with his exceptional beauty in that moment, and stealing Wang Xiaomie’s breath away as well. Wang Xiaomie stared blankly at his face in a daze.

Wen Fengjin’s smile deepened, and he said, “Xiaomie.”

“Mm?”

“Let’s go back to the mausoleum.”

“Mm.”

Mm…mm?! Wang Xiaomie’s eyes turned huge as saucers. “What did you say?!”

Chapter 61:
Even Jiangshi Can Make Social Calls

"GO BACK TO THE MAUSOLEUM?! Why?! Haven't we been living here just fine?!"

Why would they go back to the mausoleum? There was no electricity or internet, there weren't any other people, they couldn't get good things to eat… No matter how you looked at it, wasn't living on the surface better? Wang Xiaomie clenched his fists, staring in disbelief at Wen Fengjin.

Wen Fengjin was silent for a moment before asking in return, "Do you mean you aren't willing to go back to the mausoleum with me?" *I was willing to accompany you to the surface, but you aren't willing to accompany me back?*

Wang Xiaomie seemed to sense these words in Wen Fengjin's gaze. He froze up, then deflated like a balloon, his disbelief and desperate desire to refute Wen Fengjin's words falling apart in an instant. He couldn't even bring himself to look Wen Fengjin in the eye.

"I… It's not that I won't go back, but am I allowed to ask why?" Wang Xiaomie squatted down, so dejected that his head nearly drooped to touch the ground.

The smile on Wen Fengjin's face disappeared instantly when he saw him like this. Once his face darkened, that perfectly good moonlit beauty was transformed into a man-eating demon from hell. He pulled Wang Xiaomie off the ground in one swift movement. Wen Fengjin was a very strong man, so Wang Xiaomie—having failed to react in time—tumbled

clumsily into his arms, both hands flailing wildly for a good while before they were finally caught and pressed against Wen Fengjin's chest.

The thin summer material did nothing to cover the soft feel of his skin. Wang Xiaomie was startled, but also felt a complicated mix of guilt, upset, and unease—

To sum it up, he exploded.

Wide-eyed, he asked: "Did you just hit me?!" In the next instant, he declared Wen Fengjin guilty before he could get a chance to reply. "You hit me! You *hit* me!"

After convicting him, he immediately escalated the crime. "You committed domestic violence on me!"

Wen Fengjin was startled. "I didn't…"

"That was *absolutely* domestic violence!" Wang Xiaomie's face was bright red and his eyes welled with tears as he shouted in a tone that was equal parts aggrieved and equal parts a brat in need of a spanking. "I'll DV you back!"

Wen Fengjin was stupefied.

Wang Xiaomie threw himself at Wen Fengjin with a loud wail, wiggling back and forth, since he couldn't pull his arms free. He even made an attempt to headbutt Wen Fengjin with his forehead. He was the very picture of a violent girlfriend—more violent than any terrorist could be. A terrorist was at least capable of communication, whereas an angry little zongzi was entirely unwilling to listen to reason.

Wang Xiaomie nearly hit Wen Fengjin in the chin with his many attempts at headbutting, forcing Wen Fengjin to lean his head back. With the addition of Wang Xiaomie's recalcitrant writhing and struggling, Wen

Fengjin found himself leaning farther and farther backward until he was moments away from falling over.

Boss Wen—who'd never had anyone dare to defy him like this before—felt his temper start to rise as well. He released Wang Xiaomie's hands, and when Wang Xiaomie threw himself at him again, he pushed his head down. Wen Fengjin had long limbs and was taller than Wang Xiaomie, so as he pressed Wang Xiaomie's head down with one hand, Wang Xiaomie loudly cried out, "I'll kill you, I'll kill you" while waving his fists like a propellor in front of Wen Fengjin. And yet, he could not so much as graze the man before him. His puffed-up, yelling figure seemed more clumsily adorable than anything else.

When Boss "beauty in the eyes of the lover, with a million preinstalled beauty filters" Wen laid eyes on this scene, the anger in his chest largely vanished.

But the situation still needed dealing with.

Before Wang Xiaomie could figure out what was going on, his limbs were caught and he was cradled in a pair of strong arms, after which the world seemed to spin around him. In the next instant, he found himself with his belly on Wen Fengjin's legs and his upper body lying on the floor.

"You—! Fuck, don't pull down my pants! What are you doing! Aaaahhh domestic violence! Taking liberties with an innocent man!"

At this point a sleepy-eyed Bai Yu came out of his room, possibly woken up by the ruckus. "What's going on, Xiaomie…? What time is it…? The fuck kinda party's going on here?!"

He saw Wen Fengjin pulling off Wang Xiaomie's pants with a vulgar smile on his face and said "Heh heh, I get it, I get it. Sorry for interrupting.

You guys carry on.”

He then firmly shut his door again.

Wang Xiaomie thought, …*You don’t understand shit! You’re supposed to protect me!*

His sweatpants, now down to his knees, were finally pulled off entirely. Wen Fengjin firmly held Wang Xiaomie’s waist with one hand, leaned back to dodge Wang Xiaomie’s wildly kicking legs, then raised his other hand high in the air and—

Slap!

“Ow! My butt—!”

The slap was merciless. Wang Xiaomie let out a scream, feeling as if his tailbone was broken.

“You don’t want to go back to the mausoleum with me, do you? Hm?” a frowning Wen Fengjin asked in a low voice.

Wang Xiaomie struggled tearfully, but refused to open his mouth in acknowledgment.

Slap!

“Aiyo! Wen Fengjin, you jerk! Just wait ’til I get upstairs and get Kaiming to burn you to death!”

“Speak! Are you willing or not?!”

Wang Xiaomie sprawled against the floor like an overturned little turtle, lips twitching in an attempt not to cry while still finding the time to mumble insults against all of Wen Fengjin’s ancestors. Wen Fengjin frowned, but ultimately couldn’t bear to hurt him, and so was a little lighter with the next spank to his bottom.

Wang Xiaomie still refused to admit defeat after several smacks. Those two snow-white mounds were now thoroughly red. Wen Fengjin raised his hand, only to lower it again.

After a moment's silence, he stopped holding him down as well. Instead, he said a single word: "Heartless."

This word provoked Wang Xiaomie to anger. He didn't even bother to get back up, his impact-swollen butt still up in the air as he twisted his head around to shout at Wen Fengjin. "I'm heartless?! I'm heartless, after all the trouble I went through protecting you, taking knives for you and worrying for you in my past life?! I'm heartless, when the first thing I did after recovering my memories was to forgive you? If anyone else were to run into a two-faced pervert like you, they'd have turned and run in the other direction a long time ago, okay?!"

After saying all this, Wang Xiaomie sniffled, the volume of his voice dying down. "Besides, even if I don't want to go back, and can't bring myself to leave comfy modern living behind, or phones and computers and Wi-Fi and air conditioners, or takeout and fried chicken and soda and barbecue, or manga and anime and comics and games, or…"

Wen Fengjin's forehead twitched, his face getting increasingly darker. But just as he was about to interrupt, Wang Xiaomie said—

"Even though I can't bring myself to leave all those things behind, if you want to go back, then I'm willing to go back with you." With some pain, he reached back to cover his butt. Though he was speaking very quietly, and everything out of his mouth was full of reluctance, he still said, "…I'm obviously going to go wherever you go. I can't believe you'd call me heartless—I'm gonna call the cops and have them lock you up!"

The overbearing pressure Wen Fengjin was emitting slowly dissipated at this, and the crease in his brow smoothed out as well.

“Aiyo, that seriously hurts…” Wang Xiaomie’s bottom was burning with pain. He turned his head to shoot Wen Fengjin an angry glare.

Wen Fengjin, meanwhile, actually showed a hint of a smile. “In other words, you aren’t unwilling to go with me?”

“Of course I’m unwilling!” Wang Xiaomie grumbled. “But there’s no helping it… If you go, then I’ll go too…” As much as he liked all the conveniences of modernity, he didn’t truly want to be separated from Wen Fengjin. This was one point Wang Xiaomie was very clear about.

Wen Fengjin smiled.

He pulled Wang Xiaomie’s pants back up, giving his butt a conciliatory rub. A still-angry Wang Xiaomie pushed him away and then flopped against the floor like a salted fish, not even bothering to roll over.

After a long while Wang Xiaomie lifted his head to ask: “…When are we leaving?”

Wen Fengjin replied, “We’ll leave tomorrow or the day after, but that doesn’t mean we aren’t coming back.”

“What?! So we’ll still come back?!” Wang Xiaomie was dumbfounded at this.

“That’s right.” Wen Fengjin nodded. “I want to go back because I promised to meet with my old friend forty years ago, and that date is coming up in a few days. I always keep as my word, so I can’t break this promise.”

“So we’ll still be coming back in the future?”

Wen Fengjin nodded again.

Wang Xiaomie was momentarily speechless.

“Why didn’t you say so earlier?!” He burst into tears. *Why’d I even endure that this spanking, then? My poor ass!*

Wait!

Wang Xiaomie looked mistrustfully up at Wen Fengjin again, then picked himself up off the floor in one quick movement. “When did you have friends?”

Wen Fengjin having friends was practically even more unbelievable than a rooster laying eggs, okay? If anyone knew this, it was Wang Xiaomie. From the moment Boss Wen became a demon lord in his past life, he hadn’t had a single friend. Thanks to the insane number of brutal incidents where a single disagreement led to him demanding the other person’s head on a platter, pretty much everybody would take the long way around simply at the sound of his name.

Could it be a friend he’d made in modern times? That was even less possible! The two of them were newly unearthed historical relics, and everyone Wen Fengjin had met since then, he’d met too. Where could he possibly have made a friend who’d agree to meet up in forty years for a drink?

It couldn’t be…

There was a complicated look in Wang Xiaomie’s eyes as he said, “That friend of yours wouldn’t happen to be another zongzi, would it.”

Wen Fengjin said, “Yes.”

Wang Xiaomie fell silent. Okay, so zongzi these days weren't just lying in their graves like they were supposed to—they were even sauntering over to other people's graves to pay them visits.

"His way of handling things is quite similar to mine." A hint of admiration revealed itself in Boss Wen's eyes as he spoke of this friend. "Though he's two hundred years apart from us in age, his power level is higher than yours."

"What does that have to do with…" Wang Xiaomie pursed his lips. "Even Yi Yan's Sailor Scout has a higher power level than me. But if his way of handling things is similar to yours…" He tutted, then sighed with feeling as he said, "Looks like this one's another scumbag, then."

Wen Fengjin blinked.

"All right, we'll go back." Wang Xiaomie made a few noises of pain as he stood up, hands on his butt. The more it hurt, the more he felt like this spanking wasn't worth it. It was all Wen Fengjin's fault for not explaining things properly. "…I don't know how that temple I asked Lei-jie to build is doing, anyway, so I can use this opportunity to take a look at it when we go back."

As Wang Xiaomie pondered this, Wen Fengjin also stood up behind him. He reached out to wrap his arms around Wang Xiaomie's shoulders, only to get slapped away with a glare. "Don't touch me! Just look at what you did to my ass!" Wang Xiaomie made a ruckus with infantile ferocity, saying, "Nothing good will come of being a wifebeater! I want a divorce from a man like you! We're breaking up! Ptooey!"

Wen Fengjin raised his eyebrows, opening his mouth to speak.

Wang Xiaomie, sensing danger on the horizon, immediately made a run for it after that last noise of disapproval. With how agile his movements were, you'd never have guessed his butt was injured at all. It looked like all that screaming earlier was nothing but an act.

A smile revealed itself on Wen Fengjin's face. He shook his head as he followed the other man upstairs.

The next morning, Wen Fengjin gave a box to Bai Yu. "If he makes any suggestions," he said meaningfully, "remember to say yes."

Bai Yu stared blankly at him, not entirely understanding.

But Wen Fengjin had no intention of saying any more than that, so Bai Yu had no choice but to take the little box and follow the route they'd followed yesterday down to Yi Yan's shop. He'd soon come to understand what Wen Fengjin's words meant…

Chapter 62:
I'll Wait for You

BACK AT THE ANTIQUATED STORE, Yi Yan was in rubber gloves, dealing with the skeleton on the second floor. The girl stood beside him at the sink, sleeves rolled up as she washed tools. The smell of medicine mixed with that of rotting flesh.

The ever-smiling Yi Yan had a still-open wound on his right cheek, terrifying in how it stretched from the corner of his eye down to his chin. He must have put some sort of special medicine on it, as despite its not being bandaged, you could see that it was healing quickly.

But a huge injury like this was still damaging to one's looks, and Yi Yan was a very good-looking man who counted himself among the soft and gentle category of guys. If this left a scar, it really would be a pity.

Bai Yu stared at his face in shock. He didn't know that this injury was Wen Fengjin's doing, as he hadn't seen Yi Yan after Wang Xiaomie was carried out the other day. As he gazed at the wound, he couldn't stop himself from saying, "Your face…"

"Oh, this." Smiling, Yi Yan put aside his work, pulled off his gloves, and said somewhat carelessly, "It's a souvenir of an ill-advised question on my part. Just a scratch. It will heal up soon enough."

Bai Yu was flabbergasted. *This counts as a scratch?!*

But as an Artisan, Bai Yu had no doubt that Yi Yan could heal his own wounds without leaving a single scar. He held out the little box, saying, "Boss Wen wanted me to deliver this. He said it's your payment."

“Mm.” Yi Yan took the box and opened it. One glance inside left an astonished look on his face. “This really is…a generous reward.”

He closed the box again, then said to the girl behind him, “Xiao-An, put this box in the lower cabinet, then make two cups of tea—I need to entertain this guest for a bit.”

The expressionless girl nodded, dried her hands, then ran over to take the box. She squatted by the cabinets, opening the very bottom one to reveal a safe, which she planned to put the little box inside. There were so many rare and valuable materials lined up at random on the shelves, but Boss Wen’s little box was getting put in this safe on the bottom shelf. Bai Yu couldn’t help wondering what kind of reward Boss Wen had given him.

Still, upon hearing that Yi Yan was going to entertain him, Bai Yu hurriedly waved his hands. “Oh no, there’s no need for that. I just stopped by on an errand, is all.”

“Haha, are you afraid of me? Don’t worry, I won’t do anything to you.” Whenever Yi Yan smiled, he gave off an air of gentle, steady maturity unaffected by the passage of time. The tiny wrinkles that appeared at the corners of his eyes only served to make him look that much more approachable. “I often find myself quite bored in this place, but now that you’re here, I would be glad of some company for a short while. For some reason, you really look quite familiar to me.”

He placed a hand on Bai Yu’s shoulder, very politely leading him over to the downstairs parlor. Mild-mannered people like these were the absolute hardest for Bai Yu to turn down, so he had no choice but to sit down as requested, with an overabundance of caution.

The magua-wearing Yi Yan took a seat as well, pushing the fruit tray slightly in his direction. “What is your name, young friend? You seemed very interested in those materials of mine last time—would you happen to be an Artisan as well?”

Bai Yu flashed a foolish smile as he replied, “I’m Bai Yu. I can’t really count myself as an Artisan… I’m self-taught. My grandpa was one, but he disappeared.”

“Disappeared?” Yi Yan frowned slightly. “The Artisan circle is a small one, so I’m familiar with almost all the more renowned practitioners. Why don’t you tell me about him, and I’ll see if I’ve met your grandfather before.”

“Really?!” Excited, Bai Yu was about to say something, only to suddenly stop himself. He wasn’t familiar with Yi Yan, and Wang Xiaomie and Wen Fengjin seemed like they didn’t want to have anything to do with the man. What if he was a bad person? What if he was planning to get info out of him and then do who-knew-what?!

While Bai Yu catastrophized, Yi Yan across from him suddenly snorted a laugh, delightedly saying, “You really are an amusing child. Your thoughts are written all over your face. Are you worried I might do something to you? Ha ha ha, don’t worry. I won’t hurt you.”

He spoke in a tone that seemed simultaneously joking and serious. “My hands are stained with blood, but all of it is the blood of monsters—I never kill human beings. Never have and never will.”

Bai Yu’s face heated up at having been seen through. He awkwardly avoided making eye contact. “…Do…do you hate nonhumans a lot?”

“Hate? Hm…I suppose I do.” Yi Yan’s smile faded somewhat as he continued, “Those creatures aren’t human, and cannot assimilate into our lives. Sooner or later, they will hurt the human race. Aside from that, they are also extremely powerful. If they decided they didn’t want to follow humanity’s rules, just think of how many people would die.”

“But there’s good nonhumans too…” Bai Yu said in quiet rebuttal, thinking of the umbrella Wang Xiaomie had given him and the dumplings he’d made for him. Despite looking so mean, even Boss Wen had saved his life before. “If there are both good people and bad people in this world, then there must naturally be both good and bad nonhumans too.”

Yi Yan nodded with a smile. “What you say makes sense, but we have no way of distinguishing a good person from a bad one. Their very existence is like a ticking bomb for the human world. If I were to bury a landmine in your house, and told you that it wouldn’t explode, would you really be able to live there without the slightest fear?”

“I…”

Yi Yan leaned in toward Bai Yu, gazing directly into his eyes as he said, “Bai Yu, nonhumans are dangerous. This is a point you must never forget. Perhaps those nonhumans haven’t realized it themselves. Perhaps they don’t mean to hurt anyone. But the moment they go mad, their power is enough to destroy many happy households. Beings that live outside the law should not exist. Those who are not of our race are certain to have different beliefs from us. There are no exceptions.”

Bai Yu fell into stunned silence. He wanted to refute this, but didn’t know how. Knowing very well that Yi Yan was wrong, but unable to think

of any analogies or other ways to explain, he rubbed at his head, feeling even more ill at ease than before.

Yi Yan saw his unease as well, and straightened up with a sigh, his gaze and expression softening as well. “I’m sorry, I’ve said a bit too much,” he gently apologized.

Bai Yu shook his head. “…It’s fine.”

“This topic of conversation is far too serious… Let’s talk about something else,” Yi Yan said with a smile. “You said your surname is Bai, so of all the Artisans I know, Bai Cheng seems the most likely—could that be your grandfather?”

Bai Yu, who’d originally been planning to slip away, immediately turned to him with a wide-eyed stare. “That’s right! You’ve met him before? Then have you met my father, Bai He?!”

“So you really are Bai Cheng-laoshi’s grandson.” Yi Yan shook his head slightly. “I did indeed know Bai Cheng-laoshi, and even spent some time studying at his side. Your grandfather was a remarkable man, with great talent in the field of tool refinement, and spent his life doing research in this area. I learned much from him. You could even half consider me his disciple…”

“Really?” Bai Yu was wild with joy. But the words that followed extinguished his flames of excitement like a bucket of cold water.

“He disappeared,” Yi Yan said. “Twenty years ago, I stopped hearing from him. As for your father, I’ve never heard Bai Cheng-laoshi mention him. I’ve been looking for him as well, these last few years, but my travels occasionally take me to distant places to gather materials, or bring me into conflict with many different nonhumans. Someone told me the last place he

was seen was an area in which an extremely powerful nonhuman was once discovered. It's possible that…"

It's possible that he is no longer on this earth. Bai Yu's forehead was dripping with cold sweat. Though he'd prepared himself for the possibility over all these years, actually hearing it still made his heart clench for a moment.

His relatives were all gone. He was the only one left.

A pair of youthful hands reached over to press against Bai Yu's where they lay on his knees. Bai Yu looked up to discover that it was Yi Yan.

"Don't worry. I only said it was a possibility. You can rest assured that I will not stop searching for Bai Cheng-laoshi." Yi Yan's smile was a comforting one, like an elder consoling his junior, exuding a steady sense of safety.

Bai Yu's expression relaxed, and he pursed his lips with a nod.

They talked about a lot of things after that. Yi Yan was incredibly knowledgeable about every field from conversation to tool refinement. Once you got over his prejudices against nonhumans, it was very easy to grow to like him. Bai Yu was no exception to this. Before he realized it, they'd already enthusiastically chattered all the way into the night. It was only when he got hungry that he remembered the time.

"I'm sorry for intruding for so long." Bai Yu stood up and repeatedly apologized, his face gone red.

Yi Yan stood up as well, eyes curved in a smile as he shook his head. His voice was full of forgiveness. "It's not a problem. I only just realized the time as well. By the way, Bai Yu, since you want to enter this line of

work and Bai Cheng-laoshi isn't around, why don't you become my disciple and study under me?"

"Huh?" Bai Yu gaped wide-eyed at him. "That…that's not okay, is it?" Artisans always passed their craft down through their own bloodline, even insisting on passing it only to sons rather than daughters. Even if Yi Yan was doing this for his grandfather's sake, that didn't mean he could simply agree to be his disciple, right?!

"Hm? Do you mean to say that you don't want to be my disciple?" Yi Yan frowned with what appeared to be some sadness. "Whatever people might say about me, I'm still a recognized figure in Artisan circles—are you really so unwilling?"

"It's not that! I just feel like…" Bai Yu hurried to explain his misgivings.

Yi Yan laughed casually at this. "You've seen for yourself that I'm far older than I appear. And yet, I have no wife or family, and it's highly unlikely I'll ever have successors. It just so happens that you have no family either, and you're the grandson of my teacher, Bai Cheng-laoshi… Doesn't this work out perfectly for us both?"

Bai Yu was very much moved by this. When Yi Yan said he was a recognized figure, that was probably just him being modest. After all, considering his store of valuable materials, plus the skills Bai Yu had witnessed the other day, it would be no exaggeration to call him a *leading* figure in those circles.

But he was still very hesitant. Yi Yan… Was he trustworthy or not?

At this moment, he suddenly remembered the words Wen Fengjin had said to him. *"If he makes any suggestions, remember to say yes."*

Fuck… Boss Wen is beyond amazing. How did he even know that Yi Yan would want to take me as his disciple?

Bai Yu was lost in his own amazement for quite a while. Meanwhile, Yi Yan placed a hand on his shoulder. With his height, he had to lean down slightly as he faced Bai Yu with a smile. A few strands of hair escaped his braid to fall across his forehead. “Will you say yes for me, Bai Yu?”

Bai Yu gritted his teeth, then nodded firmly.

Yi Yan’s smile immediately became more genuine, his eyes creasing at the corners. The curve of his mouth made his entire figure seem warmer than before. Like an empty oil lamp that had just been lit, he made his surroundings brighter.

“I’m very glad,” Yi Yan said. “I really am very glad.”

Bai Yu was thrown off by his smile, suddenly becoming somewhat bashful. After they’d chatted a little longer, Yi Yan finally escorted him to the door.

As he was about to turn and leave, Bai Yu suddenly felt a warm hand come down on his head, mussing his short hair. He looked up to find that Yi Yan had already retracted his hand. “I’ll be waiting for your return, Bai Yu.”

After walking a good distance away, Bai Yu looked back at the little shop in that bustling street, unaware of the smile on his face. A moment later, he turned and left with a spring in his step.

Chapter 63:
I’m Stepdad to My Husband’s Kid

BAI YU SHARED THE WHOLE STORY upon getting home. He looked nervously at Wen Fengjin, who sat crossed-legged and reading a book, and Wang Xiaomie, who was dressed in indoor clothes and looking somewhat surprised. “What do you guys think?”

“…Mm, it’s great. If he really does know your grandpa and has such a deep connection, then there’s no worry of him swindling you.” Bai Yu had nothing to his name, after all. Wang Xiaomie continued, “But are you sure he’s telling the truth?”

“I’m sure,” Bai Yu responded with a nod. “He told me a lot of things about my grandpa, and a lot of it matched up with what I remember.”

Wang Xiaomie rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “All right, then, that’s a good thing. What do you think, Xiao-Wenzi?”

Bai Yu and Wang Xiaomie both turned to gaze expectantly at Boss Wen, hoping he’d give some constructive feedback.

The book was lowered ever so slightly, revealing Wen Fengjin’s cold, slender eyes. He gave an extremely perfunctory nod. “Hm.”

Bai Yu blinked.

Wang Xiaomie said, “…What’s *hm* supposed to mean, you devil?! I’m gonna beat you to death!”

Wen Fengjin let out a sigh, sharp-nailed fingers shutting the book and tossing it onto the tea table. “Yi Yan won’t hurt you.” Wen Fengjin looked

over at Bai Yu, suddenly smiling a smile that wasn't quite a smile. "If he teaches you, then learn."

What was this supposed to mean? Wang Xiaomie and Bai Yu couldn't make heads or tails of it, but before they could ask, Wen Fengjin had already stood up and circled around the sofa to leave—though as he passed Wang Xiaomie, he smilingly leaned over to say right into Wang Xiaomie's ear, "Did you not see the banner outside Yi Yan's door before, hm? Little idiot."

The words "little idiot" were said in a husky voice that fizzed with mischief like a piece of popping candy on the tongue, causing Wang Xiaomie to cover his ear with a persistent blush. By the time he came back to his senses, all that remained was Bai Yu glaring resentfully at him after having been force-fed a mouthful of dog food yet again, Wen Fengjin's footsteps having long since disappeared upstairs.

"Ahem." Wang Xiaomie blinked awkwardly as he said, "Let's not talk about that. Anyway, the point is, we don't think there's anything wrong—Yi Yan's a really odd person, but he said himself that he wouldn't do anything to hurt humans, and he's very well-disposed toward you too… Fuck, what are you blushing for?!"

Bai Yu's dark cheeks went as rosy as a highland dweller's. He chuckled continuously as he shook his head. "And here I was afraid you guys wouldn't agree to it," he said.

Wang Xiaomie blinked again. "Why wouldn't we agree to it?"

"I mean… Look, you and Boss Wen obviously don't like Yi Yan, and the three of us are all on the same team, so…" Bai Yu scratched his head. "I shouldn't be getting too close to him either, right?"

Wang Xiaomie couldn’t help bursting out in laughter at that. “Ha ha ha, do you think we’re a trio of high school girls?! Ha ha ha… Us against the world! If we don’t like ’em, then you gotta learn not to like ’em either? Ha ha ha, you’re hilarious, Da-Bai.”

Bai Yu fell silent.

Wang Xiaomie hugged his stomach with laughter for a good long while before finally getting up to sit next to Bai Yu instead. He placed a hand on his shoulder and patted it, saying, “You don’t need to overthink it, and you don’t need to care what anyone else thinks, either. You like what you like and dislike what you don’t, Da-Bai. It’s fine as long as you do what *you* think is right…”

Bai Yu bit his lip, eyes reddening, and nodded heavily. He was truly beyond grateful to have met Wang Xiaomie and Wen Fengjin—so much so that it felt like his lifetime’s worth of bad luck had all been meant to offset this current good fortune. Quietly, he thought to himself: *I’m gonna be a good bro to them for the rest of my life!*

Wang Xiaomie suddenly slapped his own forehead. “Oh, right!”

“Hm?” Bai Yu, still lost in his own thoughts, raised his head with a silly smile on his face.

Wang Xiaomie then said to him in the most sincere possible tone, “I forgot to tell you something—Wen Fengjin and I are planning to go back to our gravesite.”

“Pfft, cough, hack!” Bai Yu’s jaw practically hit the ground. “Huh? Your grave what?!”

“Gravesite.”

Bai Yu blue-screened. “What site?”

Wang Xiaomie was both amused and annoyed as he explained, “Gravesite. You know what a graveyard is, right?”

Bai Yu dully nodded his head.

The way he looked made Wang Xiaomie’s mouth twitch. “Come on, you’ve lived with us this long, and I told you we sleep in a casket, too. There’s no way you don’t know what Wen Fengjin and I really are.”

Of course he did. Bai Yu might not have the quickest brain, but he *did* understand this point. He clenched his fists, hastily asking, “…So if you really are jiangshi, and you’re about to go back to your burial ground, then…then will you still come back?”

“Of course we will,” Wang Xiaomie said. “We might be staying a little under a month, but we’ll definitely be coming back. We’ll be troubling you to look after the house while we’re gone. I’ll leave some money for you to pay the electricity and water bills.”

“That’s good, then…” Bai Yu relaxed, waving a hand at that last part as he replied, “I can pay it for you. It’s fine. You guys don’t need to worry—I’ll make sure to keep the house nice and clean.”

Wang Xiaomie was indeed quite reassured by this. He and Bai Yu chatted some more about what happened over at Yi Yan’s place, as well as random things to do with the house for the period after they left.

On the third day, they decided to buy a car for their trip. After all, the mausoleum was so far away that there was no way they could find any direct transit there. And besides, men all liked fancy cars and beautiful people.

Wang Xiaomie originally planned to buy a trendy Land Rover or something similar. Now *that* was what a man should drive. But that plan

unexpectedly failed, not because he didn't have enough money—their card had enough money to buy quite a few of them. Nor was it because there weren't any to buy, since it wasn't like those cars were limited edition.

No, the reason was Wen Fengjin—who actually freakin' wanted to take the casket with them!

…Exactly how much do you like this casket, Dage? How about I go commission eight or ten of 'em for you?!

Boss Wen stood immobile by the casket, very resolute, his beautiful face wrinkled in a frown, his gaze dark and looming. "I'm bringing it with us."

Wang Xiaomie was speechless. *Is that your wife, or am I?! Fuck, why do I feel like I'm less important than a casket? Is the casket actually Wen Fengjin's real body?! If Wen Fengjin's main body is this casket, then doesn't that mean I'm sleeping in his stomach… Oh my god, I'm getting goosebumps!*

"Boss, could you tell me why you want to bring it? We're only going back for a month. Are all those halls and beds in the mausoleum not enough for the two of us to sleep in?!"

"Shixiong and I slept together in this casket for over a thousand years."

"…So the casket is our third?"

"…No."

Wang Xiaomie laughed. "Heh heh!"

Kidney disease could sometimes be brought on by an excessive desire to beat someone up. Wang Xiaomie put his hands to his forehead,

wanting nothing more than to hit Wen Fengjin with a full set of military boxing moves plus a bonus tai chi sword.

Bai Yu, who'd come along to help pick a car, nearly wet his pants from laughter.

They ultimately ended up choosing a small freight truck meant for transportation. Wang Xiaomie's hands were shaking as he paid for it, not out of distress over the money, but out of distress for the part of him that wanted to sleep in a bed.

But after they bought it, Wang Xiaomie thought of something else. He didn't have a driver's license.

He…was going to die laughing.

He hadn't thought about driver's licenses because he'd passed the test in college back when he was Wang Xiaomie, then had completely forgotten that he'd recently changed his identity, leading them to this current mess. And Wen Fengjin was even less likely to have a modern-day license.

As Wang Xiaomie was about to cry, Bai Yu weakly raised his hand. "I have a license, so I could drive you guys over. I could even go pick you up when it's time for you to come back."

Wang Xiaomie looked at Bai Yu's dark face. He would honestly have thrown his arms around him in a death grip while yelling "You're such a good bro!" if it weren't for Wen Fengjin grabbing him by the back of the collar. He exclaimed, "Da-Bai's as pure white as your name. You're warming my heart here!"

Bai Yu puffed out his chest, laughing proudly.

They'd bought a car, and all their affairs were in order. The three of them headed out to the mausoleum that afternoon.

The wild, mountainous countryside was silent and empty, trees and grass rustling in the wind. The worn stone path showed signs of having been repaired, and the abandoned site in the near distance had been cleaned up as well. There were even piles of dirt and soil here and there, and the incomplete temple was starting to gain shape.

The sight of this stone road leading straight to the summit of the mountain caused a memory from Wang Xiaomie's past life to surface in his mind. Back then he'd been carried on someone's back as they walked up a long, long flight of stone stairs, droplets of blood falling from them like rain. He had been in unimaginable pain, so much so that even just the memory made certain parts of his body start to hurt. That boundless pain came crashing down on him, along with an endless, eternal despair.

"Shixiong."

Wang Xiaomie came back to himself with a start to find Wen Fengjin looking down at him with lowered head. The large, icy hand that covered his left cheek gently brushed his skin with a thumb. "It's all in the past."

"…Yeah." It was all in the past now. Wang Xiaomie managed a smile, then nuzzled his cheek against Wen Fengjin's palm, consoled by that icy hand and the dense sea of emotion that could be seen in Wen Fengjin's eyes.

Bai Yu—who'd driven intermittently for two days—yawned somewhat tiredly, his eyes closing for a moment. When he opened them again, it was to see Wang Xiaomie and Wen Fengjin walking hand in hand to a certain part of the woods and disappearing from sight. Wen Fengjin was also hefting a casket with one arm.

Bai Yu fell silent for a moment, then thought to himself: *Did I just watch my friends walk hand in hand into a grave of love? And the kind where they bring their own coffin along?*

Hm… That's actually pretty romantic…probably.

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Upon returning once more to the mausoleum, Wang Xiaomie suddenly felt for some reason like he'd just returned to the house after a visit to his maiden home, with his husband carrying the casket(?) along.

Particularly when he first stepped into a tomb passage in the depths of the mausoleum and saw a huge, bloody lizard rushing over from the opposite passage, spattering blood-like saliva as it did. Behind it was a rumbling crowd that included a humongous man-faced tree fungus, a long-haired water ghost, and a pair of entirely translucent jelly creatures with half their heads embedded in the wall…

The feeling became even stronger… *As if!* If Wen Fengjin weren't holding his hand he would've turned and made a break for it in an instant, okay?!

Wang Xiaomie watched expressionlessly as this contingent of monsters rushed toward them, inwardly crying, *Do you guys think you're a bunch of little cuties rushing to the door to get hugged and kissed and lifted in the air?!*

As they were surrounded by everyone from Mu Yi to Mu Shi, the group of big monsters excitedly started circling around them, even

thoughtfully taking the luggage and casket they were carrying. They were acting like they were beyond happy.

When he saw them, Wen Fengjin's face—which always looked so cold and detached when dealing with humans—revealed a hint of joy, his lips curving upward as he nodded. "You've all been very good."

Mu Yi and the others were even happier at this. They then turned to gaze expectantly at Wang Xiaomie. Wang Xiaomie hesitated for a moment, then also nodded, saying, "Uh…you're very good, yes."

Mu Yi and the others' beady scarlet eyes immediately lit up.

Wang Xiaomie was rendered speechless. For some inexplicable reason, he felt oddly like he'd become a stepfather to his husband's kids.

Chapter 64:
Hanba An Xie

WANG XIAOMIE WAS DAZZLED by an intense burst of peach blossoms the moment he opened his eyes. In that instant, he couldn't even tell where exactly he was, and needed a good long moment to remember that he and Wen Fengjin had already returned to their underground palace.

An arm reached out to wrap around his lower belly and pull him closer, leaving him with his back nestled against the chest and stomach of the man beside him.

There was also an added, let's say, third party in between them.

Wang Xiaomie's mouth twitched. He raised his iron fist of justice high in the air to bring it hammering down. The man behind him let out a grunt of pain, then placed his chin on Wang Xiaomie's shoulder and said in a husky, languid voice, "That hurt. You broke it."

Wang Xiaomie sneered. "It won't break. And our regenerative abilities are so great, even if it does break, it can just grow back again!"

Wen Fengjin let out a muffled laugh, his breath chilly. "And what if it grows back crooked?"

Wang Xiaomie turned to glare at him. "It wasn't straight to begin with!" *It's already bent into a mosquito coil!* "Get up. Isn't today the day that friend of yours comes over? We might have become zongzi, but we should still tidy up at least. Just think of what it would look like if he got here and saw us climbing out of the casket with our clothes all disheveled!"

Wang Xiaomie shoved him, his hand sliding into the collar of Wen Fengjin's already loose robe and getting a feel of the solid muscle inside. He froze up at this, then cleared his throat, giving it a good few more feels before climbing out of the casket like nothing had happened.

Wen Fengjin narrowed his eyes in appreciation of the sensation that skin contact gave him. His deep pupils widened slightly once that hand pulled away, after which he silently poked at his teeth with the tip of his tongue.

Having changed into a new blazing red outfit, Wang Xiaomie sat on a round stool as Wen Fengjin gently used an oxhorn comb to brush his cumbersomely long hair before fixing it with a hair tie and a jade-crown hairpin.

Wang Xiaomie took advantage of the moment when Wen Fengjin was busy arranging his own clothes before the full-length mirror to try copying him by closing his eyes and calling for Mu Yi and the others.

By the time Wen Fengjin was done, Mu Yi's gang had arrived at the side hall. "Hm…how shall we entertain our guests?" Wang Xiaomie hesitated a moment before setting out individual tasks for everyone from Mu Yi to Mu Shi. "There's a lot of mechanisms in the mausoleum—Mu San, you turn off all the ones you can. What will we do if our guest walks in the door and falls down some random corner? As for those mermaid lamps, light all the ones you can, so we can try to brighten the place up a bit… We've got a lot of pretty cups in the side halls… I don't know where to begin serving him when he arrives." Wang Xiaomie turned to ask Wen Fengjin, "Where did you two do your drinking last time?"

Wen Fengjin, paying keen attention to Wang Xiaomie's arrangements, quietly laughed as he replied, "Right under the tree."

"All right…" Wang Xiaomie said after some thought, "Xiao-Wenzi, take down the casket for now and put it in a side hall. It won't be very good to have a 'bed' right there when you're drinking. Mu Wu, fetch the little table and sitting cushions from the side hall and set them out here, and get those nice-looking wine cups too. Oh right! Speaking of drinking, why didn't I know we had alcohol in this mausoleum?!" He glared at Wen Fengjin. "Have you been hiding wine behind my back?"

"I had some buried when we were interred. I rarely ever drink it." Wen Fengjin struggled to suppress a smile, watching as Wang Xiaomie racked his brains and issued orders in a serious attempt to get the mausoleum ready. He let out a laugh and said, "You really seem just like the matriarch of the Wen family right now."

"…Bah." *Who're you calling a matriarch?* You're *the matriarch! Don't think I won't take my pants off to prove my identity!*

Wang Xiaomie rolled his eyes at Wen Fengjin, urging him to hurry up and go, while Mu Yi and friends happily rushed off to complete their respective assignments. They seemed to think this was a fun new game. Even Wen Fengjin radiated a sense of joy at getting ordered around, a fact that rather perplexed Wang Xiaomie. He didn't know that, in Wen Fengjin's eyes, his earnest and careful attitude made it seem as if he'd truly made the mausoleum his home, and felt a sense of belonging toward it.

By the time everyone was done bustling around, the entire mausoleum looked brand-new. Well, not really, but at least being brightly lit

gave it the cozy feeling of a place people lived in. It also gave Wang Xiaomie a sense of accomplishment, more or less.

As he was about to ask when their guest was going to arrive, Wen Fengjin said, “He’s here.”

At that moment, Wang Xiaomie was standing arm in arm with Wen Fengjin atop a multistory cliffside building connected to the platform. At Wen Fengjin’s words, Wang Xiaomie straightened up and looked toward the cavern’s entrance. Row upon row of inextinguishable mermaid lamps lit up the side hall, from which a group of people quickly entered their field of vision…

There was a young man in a military officer’s uniform carrying something in his arms. A beast-head buckle secured his leather armor at the waist, and he bore a longsword at his side. Copper pieces were embedded in his boots, making clicking noises against the ground as he walked. He didn’t have a helmet, but wore a high ponytail with a forehead ribbon and a long-feathered crown, like a young general in some video game. He looked carefree and relaxed, walking forward with long strides, his outfit lightweight and comfortable in its lack of complicated finery. Judging from his face, he couldn’t be more than nineteen or so.

…Of course he could’ve been nineteen before he died. As for how old he is now…according to Wen Fengjin he’s at least a thousand years old.

The people following him—whom Wang Xiaomie could not make out the details of—stopped moving once they got to the side hall. Only that teenage general continued to proceed forward. He didn’t have the jiangshi-like, blank-eyed ugliness Wang Xiaomie had imagined. In fact, he looked

just like a living person. It wasn't until he got closer that Wang Xiaomie realized what he was carrying in his arms wasn't a thing, but a person.

A tightly wrapped, legless person…

The other party had clearly seen them as well, for he flashed Wen Fengjin a bright, respectful smile. His expression turned to one of shock and astonishment when he noticed Wang Xiaomie standing by Wen Fengjin's side with their arms linked together. This was followed by his eyebrows rising as high as they could go.

As he arrived before them, he cut in before Wang Xiaomie could say a word of welcome. "Congratulations, Wen-qianbei. Is this Madam Wen? I never thought I'd see the day when you woke up." His gaze swept over their interlinked arms, a hint of envy in his voice. "The two of you have sincere feelings for each other. Not like me and my wife—all he ever does is make me angry."

A smile appeared in Wen Fengjin's eyes at this. He said, with a subtly flaunting tone, "Shixiong is indeed very considerate toward me."

Wang Xiaomie wondered, *Considerate how? With that Line-Ending Iron Fist of Justice I gave you this morning? Also, wife?*

Wang Xiaomie covertly looked at the thoroughly wrapped-up person in the teenage general's arms. "Er, is this your wife? Why doesn't she talk?"

"Talk?" The teenage general laughed. "It's because you were ritually cultivated with the demon lord's blood that you have such a complete body and consciousness. My wife and I cultivated ourselves slowly, from normal jiangshi. I myself only shed my red hair two hundred years ago, becoming a hanba and regaining the entirety of my human consciousness, as well as the

ability to walk freely. As for my wife, he cultivates very slowly, and is still unable to speak."

He slightly pulled aside the white cloth covering the person in his arms, revealing a withered, ghostly hand with pitch-black fingernails, covered in spinelike purple hair. The sight nearly made Wang Xiaomie jump with fright. Wen Fengjin imperceptibly pulled him a little closer, allowing Wang Xiaomie to gulp and calm himself down.

The teenage general across from them didn't seem to find anything at all strange about his "wife." Sweetly supporting the person with one arm, he brought that ghostly hand up to his mouth and kissed it.

Wang Xiaomie was startled. *Fuck, he can even kiss a thing like that? Doesn't the hair prick his mouth? Damn, now I definitely believe in true love again!*

Wen Fengjin found nothing strange about this scene, either. He pulled a stiffened Wang Xiaomie along as he led the teenager to take a seat at the low table under the pining tree. The short-legged little table already had hot wine simmering atop it. The fine brew—which had been hidden away for who knew how many years—grew even more fragrant under the effects of the heat, so the teenage general smelled it immediately upon sitting and gave it a good many words of praise.

They'd only put out three cushions, but as the teenage general refused to put down his "wife" even when thirsting for wine, Wang Xiaomie didn't bother calling Mu Yi and the others over.

"Xiaomie," Wen Fengjin suddenly said.

Wang Xiaomie hurriedly sat up at that. "What is it?"

Wen Fengjin said with a smile, “I haven’t properly introduced you yet. This is the friend I mentioned to you before. He was a high-ranking military officer in the kingdom of Da’an two hundred years after we died, known as An Xie. By his side is his wife, An Chengjing.”

Wang Xiaomie immediately nodded at An Xie.

Wen Fengjin then said to An Xie, “As for my shixiong, you already know him, so there’s no need for further introduction.”

“I met the madam last time I was here, though he’d yet to wake, then.” An Xie protectively sat the person in his arms between his crossed legs, saying, “I’m a military official, and once mentioned to Qianbei that the two of you were renowned historical figures. I’d always yearned for a love like yours back then. Who could have imagined that, although I wasn’t able to meet you when I was alive, Wen-qianbei would grant me the honor of meeting you both after death?”

“…Heh heh, you’re flattering us, really.” *Renowned historical figures? Are you sure we didn’t go down in infamy?* Wang Xiaomie’s mouth twitched at the corners as he thought of all the things Wen Fengjin did before he died—and he wasn’t even going to *bother* bringing up what he did *after*. The fact that Wen Fengjin didn’t rip the roof right off the emperor’s house was already strange enough.

Also, a love like ours? Wang Xiaomie expressionlessly thought, *What did Wen Fengjin think we had between us back then? Oh, yeah, you mean the melodramatic way we obsessively abused each other, ending with me dying and Wen Fengjin actually going for a lover’s suicide? Heh heh. What about that is fuckin’ worth yearning for? Shit!*

But however many epithets Wang Xiaomie spat in his mind, he couldn’t be his usual disrespectful self with Wen Fengjin when in the presence of Wen Fengjin’s friend. Besides, this was their first meeting as well, so he wanted to stay relatively well-behaved in front of this friend of Wen Fengjin’s. And so he did his best to sit in a somewhat more dignified manner, wearing an elegant and appeasing smile on his face.

This meeting between ancient friends was rather more simple than the wining and dining of modern friends. Even a military officer like An Xie wouldn’t go casually bragging in conversation. He was reserved, using gorgeous, flowery language and lines of poetry as he and Boss Wen showered each other with praise, occasionally even letting the alcohol push him to share ballads that were popular back when he was alive.

His refined and elegant diction left Wang Xiaomie entirely mystified. It wasn’t until he revealed a little more about his past that Wang Xiaomie learned that An Xie was the grandson of the Duke of Qing. Though he’d later become a military officer, he was still a ranking member of a rich and powerful family, so it was only natural that he’d be well-bred.

Even as a zongzi, this guy was the Mister Perfect of zongzi.

But for a ranking member of an influential household, family was far more important than love. Ninety percent of the time, one’s parents selected a marriage partner with an appropriate social status. Wang Xiaomie cast a surreptitious glance at the “wife” in An Xie’s arms. He would never have imagined that a man with this sort of background would be so steadfastly loyal to his wife, even as a zongzi.

And Wen Fengjin said An Xie was similar to him? How were they similar? Because they were both men?

Wang Xiaomie sneakily gave his feral husband the middle finger.

Chapter 65:
A Monster's Love

"HANBA… WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?" Wang Xiaomie asked this with some curiosity.

Wen Fengjin and An Xie turned to look at him. Before Wen Fengjin could answer, An Xie straightforwardly said, without the slightest hesitation, "Ah. That's a type of animated corpse. The corpse will be just like when it was alive, but it brings drought wherever it goes, and all the plants will wither."

"Oh." So that's how it was. Wang Xiaomie nodded.

A little blue wine-filled cup was placed on the low table. An Xie took a moment to adjust his seated position, one hand against the table, while the other held onto the person in his arms.

The teenage general's wine-stained lips drew into a curve on his handsome face. "Madam, you slept for a thousand years under the demon lord's blood cultivation ritual and woke in the same form you had before, so you wouldn't know this very well—there's actually very strict rules for whether a corpse becomes a jiangshi or a hanba."

Wang Xiaomie furrowed his brow. "Are there? Then how did you become a hanba?"

"That's a very long story, but we've got wine and flowers today, so I don't mind telling you." An Xie quirked his lips as he continued, "The land was consumed by chaos after the Northern Kingdom fell. A few small kingdoms rose up one after the other, only to fall as well before long. The

kingdom of Da’an started around that time, and the war and internal strife… Well, there’s nothing worth saying about that. As the grandson of the Duke of Qing, I was a study partner for the princes in my youth, and was on friendly terms with the third prince…”

Though the young teenager was an accomplished scholar of noble background, and was given reminders by his elders of which princes to befriend and which positions to take before he entered the palace, when had a human heart ever been something that could be perfectly controlled? Particularly when its owner was just an ignorant child?

An Xie’s features softened, revealing a nostalgic expression. Still relatively ignorant, the young An Xie had only believed in what he could see. He was entirely unguarded with the women of the palace, whose machinations went deeper than anything in the royal court.

Though the first prince was the eldest son, he wasn’t born of the empress. His mother, who had no real power or influence, died of illness amid all the internal strife, after which the empress raised him by her side. The two appeared to be a loving mother and filial son, but everyone knew that the one who would one day sit the throne wasn’t the first prince. The second prince was the empress’s own child, and the empress herself had the backing of a rich and influential family, so it was a given who’d be taking that position in the future.

As for the third prince? His mother was the Virtuous Concubine, and he came from decent stock. But the third prince himself was secretly judged by all the ministers for having “a womanly appearance, a short-sighted mind, and a total lack of judgment in personnel.” To put it simply, he looked girlish, lacked the imposing manner of a monarch, and was

inexperienced, weak, easy to bully, overly trusting, and didn't know how to use people.

But when the seven-year-old An Xie saw the five-year-old third prince, he was immediately dazzled by the soft and graceful beauty of that androgynous figure. Lacking both knowledge and experience, he could only rely on appearances to get to know a person. And so that one startling glimpse of beauty became irrevocably rooted in the youth's mind as a happy memory. Femininity seemed like sweetness, timidity seemed like forbearance, the inability to read people seemed like tenderheartedness. *Those ministers must all be blind,* he'd thought.

An Xie placed his fingers against his own face, the tip of his thumb pressing pale lips as he smiled without the slightest hint of emotion.

Wang Xiaomie was a bit confused. Why did he get the feeling…that An Xie liked that third prince?! *No no, definitely not! There's no way. It's definitely just my fudanshi eyes seeing him as gay!* Wang Xiaomie internally knocked himself on the head, then went back to listening.

This didn't escape Wen Fengjin's notice. He licked some wine off his lips, brows rising in a mischievous smile.

An Xie couldn't help defying his family's orders and constantly interacting with the third prince, even taking the third prince's side in the end. This course of action angered the empress and second prince's forces.

Ah, young love… In ancient times, boys would marry at thirteen. The eleven-year-old An Xie was made to kneel in his ancestral hall for three straight days, but he refused to back down. With this boy being the only heir to his family line, the Duke of Qing had no choice but to align himself with the neutral centrist faction, knowing he would be in for it once one

side had won out over the other. He had An Xie retire from his position as study partner and return home for self-reflection.

But he and the third prince didn't break contact. The two of them secretly relied on palace maids to pass papers and thoughts to each other. Year after year and day after day, An Xie reveled in this sweetness and joy, dreaming every night of that beautiful face…

Wang Xiaomie thought, *The more I listen, the more it sounds like two youngsters in a secret relationship. What the heck?!*

Over the next few years, more and more changes took place in the palace. The third prince's letters often lamented that his second brother would likely kill him once he ascended the throne.

"And so at thirteen, I went to the border. This was the fastest way to both stand out among my fellows and gain power for myself." At the time, An Xie's mind was full of nothing but the need to gain enough power and influence to put the third prince on the throne. He abandoned the comfortable and luxurious life of a nobleman, and nearly died on the battlefield many times, making the Duke of Qing all but die of fury—he was his family's only son, after all!

An Xie lowered his gaze, letting out a sad huff of laughter. "The only thing in my mind was the person I loved. I didn't have a single thought for my family and parents, heh."

The young military commander grew up bathed in blood. His straightforward outer appearance now concealed a strong and unfeeling heart, each spray of warm blood from the enemies he killed having changed him into a different man from who he once was.

But the softness beneath his hard outer shell eventually earned him the happiness he'd dreamed of. At nineteen, An Xie was already the youngest general in the country. With his military leadership, the Duke of Qing's assistance, and his own unyielding methods, he managed to push the third prince onto the throne.

I knew it… He really was *another gay after all! If this wasn't true love, I'll livestream myself eating a keyboard!*

Wang Xiaomie glowered and pinched Wen Fengjin's thigh hard as the man muffled a laugh by his side. Wen Fengjin merely raised his eyebrows at this, then leaned close to Wang Xiaomie's ear. His low, sexy, masculine voice—tinged with the scent of alcohol—turned Wang Xiaomie's face bright red.

He said, "Shixiong, that hurts~"

Great. Wang Xiaomie whispered through clenched teeth, "Don't blow in my ear! Do you think I won't give you even more pain?" He raised his iron fist of justice.

Wen Fengjin joyfully laughed aloud, slouching insouciantly as he downed the wine in his cup. He didn't tease Wang Xiaomie further.

"I really do envy you as much as ever…" An Xie finished off his wine as well, sighing with feeling as he did so.

"You're also, er, doing pretty well." Wang Xiaomie cast a glance at An Xie and the person he'd been carrying this entire time. "Aren't the two of you together now?"

To his surprise, An Xie burst out in loud laughter at his words. "Together? I wouldn't have become a hanba if that were the case."

Huh?

An Xie continued his story.

Fairy tales always ended with “the prince and princess lived happily ever after,” because even the people who wrote those stories were keenly aware of the fact that what went on to follow that passionate ending wouldn’t necessarily be happiness.

An Xie was that way as well. The third prince he’d always loved was the older, infinitely gentle, pure, and flawless figure he’d constructed in his mind, all blemishes removed by his imagination. But why would the actual third prince care for a single child’s affection? He only cared about having the Duke of Qing behind him.

After receiving the sweet taste of An Xie’s favor, the third prince became inclined to ingratiate himself with the boy. Those slips of paper, filled with sweetly honeyed words and hidden suggestions, had all been deliberated over by the third prince and his mother. That private slice of love had been dissected many times over.

The third prince was five years older than An Xie, meaning in the year that An Xie left for the battlefield at thirteen, he was already eighteen and ready for marriage. But both the third prince and his mother knew there was no way they could find him a good woman while the empress loomed over them. So they abandoned the idea of marriage, found a few pure palace maids to wait in attendance for the time being, and told An Xie that it was all for An Xie’s sake…

“Actually, it wasn’t the ministers who were blind, but me.”

An Xie was smiling as brightly as ever as he slowly tore open this dark and bloody fairy tale for a dumbstruck Wang Xiaomie. Whenever An Xie returned from the border and tried to enter the palace for an intimate

moment with the third prince, the prince would coyly use bashful words to get out of it. At the time, An Xie was blinded by his own imagination, and had no suspicions whatsoever.

Later, right after he'd established the third prince on the emperor's throne, an emergency arose on the border. Some of the intelligence he'd received suggested there was something strange about this situation, but he still set forth for the sake of his beloved's country.

Who would have imagined that shortly after he arrived at the battlefield, the third prince—now the emperor—would find some random excuse to wipe out the Duke of Qing's entire household? He followed this by cutting off An Xie's provisions and rear support, abandoning him to be encircled by the enemy. It was efficient and decisive, as if the prince had been waiting for this day for a very long time, only needing to set things in motion.

Wang Xiaomie silently picked up his own wine cup to take a sip. *This is too tragic. Gods, can you get any more tragic than this?*

After An Xie's entire army was destroyed, the newly appointed general brought in his forces and quickly stabilized the situation. They all thought An Xie had died—but he had survived. Contrary to everyone's expectations, he rushed back to the imperial city, galloping all the way through without rest or even stopping to care for his wounds, as if he had become an evil spirit.

With the Duke of Qing's manor left in ruins because of his so-called love, An Xie expressionlessly inhaled the scent of the blood welling from his chest, then slipped into the imperial palace using the secret passage he'd once created for the sake of fooling around with the third prince. The third

prince had yet to seal off that secret passage. When he received the news that An Xie's entire army was destroyed, he summoned dancing girls to celebrate and make merry, and naturally forgot about this insignificant matter.

While the new emperor celebrated, An Xie went around to all the newly titled royal princes and princesses—he hadn't even known until now that the third prince had offspring—as well as the imperial concubines, maids, and eunuchs, and broke their necks one after the other.

He killed every last one of them!

Chaos quickly broke out. However cautious he may have been, this was still the imperial palace. As he was chased down, An Xie managed to make it to the new emperor. Bolstered by his hatred and resentment, he was able to shrug off what should have been countless fatal injuries as he took the emperor captive.

In truth, An Xie was already dead at that point—it was simply that his mind was too muddled to realize it.

After accomplishing history's greatest revenge killing, An Xie kidnapped the terror-stricken third prince and charged all the way to the border without once even closing his eyes, trailing pursuing troops and assassins in his wake. During that rough journey, the third prince tried to break free and kill An Xie. But An Xie's body had already undergone a transformation that allowed him to resist the knife. Instead, he picked up a rock and smashed both the third prince's legs to pieces.

Gradually, An Xie's body started to show patches of livor mortis. His eyes turned scarlet and he began to emit the smell of rot, even growing long red hair. The pursuing assassins and soldiers were so frightened by his

appearance that they didn’t dare come near him. Everyone said that General An had died on the battlefield, and his overwhelming resentment that had transformed him into an evil creature after death.

And so it was that An Xie brought the third prince to the battlefield in which his subordinates had died, and personally killed both the prince and himself…

“Thinking back, I suppose it didn’t really count as *dying*…” An Xie said. “Back then, the massive amount of resentful energy and bloody qi on that battlefield turned me into the monster I am now. Later, the newly crowned young emperor took a Daoist priest’s advice and had him bury me on Mount Qi, for fear that I might do evil otherwise. They knew perfectly well how I’d died, so to placate the public, the young emperor even made a sign to commemorate me and my dead brethren, placing it in the memorial temple for heroic martyrs.”

An Xie drank his wine, still hugging the person in his arms as he continued, “I love him, and he loves me too. But he made a mistake, and so I corrected him. I will correct his wrongs, even if I must shatter his bones to do it. He cannot move or speak. All he needs to do is be the object of my love.”

He let out a loud roar of laughter. His rough, scarred hands gripped the person’s neck through the white cloth that wrapped it as he leaned down to give him a kiss. Wang Xiaomie wasn’t quite sure, but he thought he saw the white cloth tremble slightly. Even if it hadn’t, Wang Xiaomie was definitely close to trembling himself.

He’d been wrong… This guy was *way* too similar to Wen Fengjin, okay?! He could practically feel his scalp tingling at An Xie’s bright smile

and his intimate treatment of the person beneath that white cloth.

It wasn't that An Xie couldn't recognize reality, but that even if he knew it, he straight-up didn't care. He liked the third prince in his memories. If the real man didn't match those memories, then he'd just mold him into the form he liked.

Killing all his offspring and breaking both his legs, turning him into a crippled jiangshi who could neither run nor speak, insisting on sweet, sensual moments even after death, making it so that he couldn't even kill himself if he wanted to… Refusing to rest, even in death—this level of obsession definitely got a full score!

Inwardly, Wang Xiaomie was so shocked that his jaw was about to hit the floor. Wen Fengjin, meanwhile, nodded in appreciation. "Not bad."

"You flatter me, Qianbei."

"Heh heh."

"Ha ha."

The two men smiled at each other, clinked their cups, and continued cheerfully enjoying their wine.

Wang Xiaomie was flabbergasted. He silently cast a sideways glance at the white cloth in An Xie's arms. He had the feeling that their friend under the cloth was already vibrating with fear…

He looked over at Wen Fengjin and An Xie's exceedingly handsome faces and exceedingly bright smiles. *Damn. What the hell kind of demonic romance is this? Divorce! I seriously gotta divorce!*

Chapter 66:
What a Man Must Undertake

THEY DRANK to their hearts' content.

It was a mystery how this fine wine was made, for it to be so refreshing, aromatic, and completely unclouded even after all these years—though it was also very strong, with a huge kick as it went down your throat.

Wang Xiaomie once tried lighting it on fire, only for it to burst into blue-red flames. *What is this, vodka? Fuck!*

The point was that, after downing only a few small cups, Wang Xiaomie started feeling warm both inside and out, his head growing dizzy and his vision losing focus, his face becoming less and less expressive and his mind starting to wander. Knowing he was near his limit, he quickly put down his cup and sat up properly for fear that he might make a spectacle of himself in front of their guests.

Wen Fengjin and An Xie, meanwhile, could really hold their liquor. They'd nearly emptied three small jars, and not only was there no indication of drunken behavior from either of them, but the alcohol was even increasingly giving them more of that flippant recklessness particular to the romantics of antiquity.

Men being men, once they got in high enough spirits, it was unavoidable that they'd start discussing things they were proud of. And so the expressionlessly belching Wang Xiaomie heard Wen Fengjin start bragging to An Xie about his life's greatest undertaking—his wife.

Wang Xiaomie had nothing to say to that.

In the beginning, it was An Xie who suddenly brought it up in the middle of their poetry exchange, saying, “When I arrived at your palace, it was brightly lit with lanterns, and the courtyard and gate were spotless. This doesn’t seem like your style, Wen-qianbei, so I assume it must be the madam’s doing.”

Wang Xiaomie pursed his lips, suppressing the urge to belch, and dazedly nodded at those words.

An Xie continued, “Wen-qianbei is very fortunate to have such a kind and devoted wife.”

Boss Wen quirked his lips at that. “He’s very good, and often acts spoiled around me.”

Wang Xiaomie blushed. *You’re talking nonsense. I never do that!*

“My Chengjing occasionally acts spoiled as well, though.” An Xie threw back another cup of wine before proudly saying, “Just the other day, he tried to choke me by the neck because of my intimacy, entirely forgetting that I no longer need to breathe. Ha ha ha ha. It was adorable.”

Wang Xiaomie’s mouth twitched. …*Wake up, bro, the guy genuinely wants you dead! At this point, I barely know what the phrase “acting spoiled” even means anymore! You call that adorable? I see nothing friggin’ adorable about it!*

Wen Fengjin nodded, then tilted his head to look at Wang Xiaomie. “Come to think of it, you rarely take initiative yourself.”

…Am I mishearing things, or does Boss Wen sound like he’s a little jealous?

After a moment of silence, Wang Xiaomie replied through gritted teeth, “My bad. Don’t worry, next time I’ll make sure to buy the strongest rope I can find. If I strangle you every night, then sooner or later I’ll have you sent off to the afterlife!”

“Good. I’m very much looking forward to it.” That low laughter lasciviously tickled Wang Xiaomie’s ears.

Wen Fengjin smiled as he tossed his head back and downed his wine. A few drops rolled from the corner of his mouth to slide over his Adam’s apple and collarbone before disappearing into the collar of his shirt.

“Shixiong may not be proactive, but he’s incredibly forgiving and takes extremely loving care of me,” Wen Fengjin suddenly said.

Wang Xiaomie stared blankly for a second, then coughed a few times as he lowered his head, his ears entirely red.

Watching the two of them, An Xie bounced the white-wrapped person in his arms and said, “Sure enough, the more I see, the more envious I become. Chengjing can’t even blush, and his body is covered in poisonous purple hair. Ai, there’s far too much hair… I can’t clearly see his face, and it pricks my mouth. Luckily, there isn’t any *there*.”

Wang Xiaomie blinked. *Where the fuck is ‘there’ supposed to be, huh?! This is a respectable story we’re in, here. Don’t go saying anything weird!*

Wen Fengjin was just about to say something, but Wang Xiaomie slapped a hand against his mouth. “I’m going to kill you if you dare say anything unnecessary!” Beet red, he hissed this through clenched teeth, while Wen Fengjin gazed at him with a cheerful look in his long and narrow eyes.

The two of them stared at each other for a good while. And then, Wang Xiaomie felt something wet in the palm of his hand.

He was speechless. *I'm seriously gonna frickin' beat you to death today! Nobody can stop me!*

Wang Xiaomie only managed to stop himself from committing domestic violence by repeating to himself, "Don't hit him. There's guests here, guests." Eventually, he managed to relax his tightly fisted hands. Deciding to go the "out of sight, out of mind" route, he picked up his wine cup and turned to face the pining tree as he chugged like he was putting out a fire.

Boss Wen, meanwhile, deviously continued his bragging session with An Xie. It went something like this:

Boss Wen: "My shixiong is beautiful and kind, a proper gentleman and gentle as the fairest of women."

An Xie: "My Chengjing is venomous as a snake, but he's good-looking."

Boss Wen: "My shixiong is older than me, and carefully protected me in my most downtrodden childhood years, giving me all he could."

An Xie: "My Chengjing is older than me, and only cared to manipulate my emotions in my most innocent childhood years, but he's good-looking."

Boss Wen: "My wife can do housework as well."

An Xie: "My wife is good-looking."

Boss Wen: "My wife can cook."

An Xie: "My wife is good-looking."

Boss Wen: “My wife is considerate and agreeable.”

An Xie: “My wife is good-looking.”

“My—”

“My—”

Half a shichen later, the two fully satisfied men, finally done showing off, raised their cups in unison, once more sharing a smile with each other.

Wang Xiaomie, who’d watched this entire thing play out from the sidelines, thought: *Wen Fengjin’s one thing, but what in God’s name brought* you *satisfaction, An Xie?!*

Face-cons really were beyond hope of any cure.

A depressed Wang Xiaomie started chugging alcohol, completely forgetting that he was a useless weakling who’d pass out after three cups.

And so, one shichen later—

Wen Fengjin’s narrow eyes cast a smiling sideways glance at Wang Xiaomie’s flushed face as he silently shifted in his seat.

This alcohol’s aftereffect was far too strong. Wang Xiaomie sat perfectly straight, red-faced and expressionless, but as soon as he noticed something beside him, he stiffly, quietly, and gradually leaned against Wen Fengjin’s shoulder as Wen Fengjin and An Xie looked on.

“Burp.”

Once he had fully leaned over, Wang Xiaomie smacked his lips and let out a belch, eyelids drooping as he softly nuzzled his forehead against the shoulder he lay upon.

Wen Fengjin and An Xie couldn’t help but laugh aloud. “Ha ha ha…”

“I envy you! I really do!” An Xie boldly tossed the cup he was holding into the abyss below the platform, before lifting an open jar off the table with one hand and taking a huge swig from it. Wen Fengjin, meanwhile, continued sitting with his back against the pining tree. Red peach petals fell upon on the black table and cups.

“But Wen-qianbei, there’s one thing I should tell you.” Suddenly, An Xie kissed the figure wrapped in white cloth in his arms, put down the jar, and schooled his face into a serious expression. “About twenty years ago, I ran into a peculiar human. He was incredibly hostile toward folk like us, and called us people outside the law.”

Wen Fengjin paused in the middle of taking another sip.

An Xie continued, “Many corpses are buried at my home of Mount Qi. Most of these possess no exceptional talent, so they aren’t particularly clear-minded, and ate a few people out in the modern world.”

He said this in a careless manner, appearing neither frightened nor dissatisfied at their having eaten people. Wang Xiaomie’s attention was drawn to his words. He lifted his head, a foolish smile on his face.

“That man probably first came to Mount Qi just to track down and eliminate those idiots.” Alcohol sloshed against the insides of the jar, and the long, long feathers on his crown swung around as An Xie took another swig. “His weapon was a strange one—a long-handled thing with a little copper-gold hammer on the end, which must have been very effective against the iron-hard bodies of jiangshi, for those idiots’ scent quickly disappeared.”

A long-handled little golden hammer?! Wen Fengjin’s face darkened as he put down his blue cup. Wang Xiaomie was almost completely sobered

again, too.

An Xie shook his jar, saying, “The funny thing is that one of my old subordinates was in that group of good-for-nothings. Before he died, he revealed my existence to that man. Soon enough, the man showed up with a team of grave robbers and even equipped them all with more of those weapons. They started digging all over our tomb, heh. He really did find me, too! I was already a hanba by then, and while that strange weapon was irritating enough to injure me somewhat, I nearly killed him… He would have died…or he *should* have died…but…”

An Xie’s smile disappeared. The jar hit the table with a loud *thunk*.

“But after drinking some kind of strange blood, he gained a huge burst of strength and ran away. That blood smelled a lot like that of you and your wife. Would you be able to give me an explanation, Qianbei?”

It was at this moment that Wang Xiaomie truly realized how fearsome An Xie—a man who entered the battlefield at thirteen, died soaked in blood and filled with hate, and had such powerful resentful energy that he immediately turned himself into a jiangshi—really was when he dropped his smile. Those eyes and the surrounding atmosphere became so sharp they could cut open any skin that was exposed to the open air.

The air filled with the tangy scent of blood and a terrifying pressure sweeping over the previously cheery table. Wang Xiaomie shuddered. He was about to do something in reaction when Wen Fengjin reached out to knock against the table.

Knock knock.

Silver hair wound over Wen Fengjin’s fire-red clothes, his pitch-black eyes narrowing against his beautiful face as he dryly said, “You’re scaring

him.” This was followed up with, “Do you think you have a very hard head?”

The bitter aroma of medicine instantly dispelled the scent of blood, allowing Wang Xiaomie to relax.

An Xie fell silent for a moment under Wen Fengjin’s gaze before suddenly breaking into a grin. “I’m just a military man making a joke after a little too much wine. I hope Wen-qianbei and Madam won’t take offense… But that man does in fact exist, as does the blood I mentioned. That human was a madman willing to go to extremes and use any tricks at his disposal if it meant he could kill me—or, should I say, kill all ‘people’ like us. I’m just warning you out of the kindness of my heart.”

An Xie picked the jar back up again for another swig, surplus wine spilling onto his body. An inexplicable smile revealed itself in his eyes as he threw back his head. “We’re all the same monsters, after all…”

Wen Fengjin did not comment on this.

Wang Xiaomie, meanwhile, asked after a moment’s silence, “What did that man look like…? Do you know his name?”

“Hm…let me think. He wore a strange blue-green robe, his hair was mostly white and kept in a braid, and I heard those grave robbers calling him…Yi Yan.”

“What?!” Wang Xiaomie’s eyes widened in shock.

The wholesale market finally emptied out in the late hours of the night, making it seem a little more peaceful than before.

Bai Yu, wearing a backpack, quickly took the lock from Yi Yan’s hands and locked up the shop for him. He scratched his head in embarrassment when he turned around to see Yi Yan’s smiling face.

The pair walked side by side down the street in quiet harmony. The rainy evening was somewhat chilly, and Bai Yu, wearing a half-sleeve shirt, rubbed his arms to try to warm up.

In the next instant, warm hands wrapped themselves around his naked arms and pushed him to the side with a force that was neither gentle nor hard. Yi Yan wordlessly took the windy spot, guarding him from the chilly night breeze.

The two of them continued walking as if the tiny interlude had never happened. But as Bai Yu looked over at Yi Yan—whose gaze was focused straight ahead—and quickly looked away again, his dark face was lightly tinted with red.

Chapter 67:
Because of Him~

THERE WERE STILL-OPEN restaurants and clothing stores shedding illumination on either side of the road. Despite the late hour, there were still many window shoppers, chatting among themselves as they passed by the pair.

“I suppose you’re on your own again today,” Yi Yan suddenly remarked. “How about having dinner with me?”

“Huh?!” Bai Yu jumped in fright as he was pulled out of his private thoughts. Fearing that he’d overreacted, he looked at Yi Yan’s face in a panic. Yi Yan was always smiling, but in the moment, his smile was even more tolerant and gentle than normal, reassuring him about his awkwardness.

His magua, with his mostly white hair pulled back into a braid, made him look like a historical Chinese citizen. This drew sideways looks from a lot of passersby, but he paid no attention to them, his gentle gaze trained on Bai Yu alone. Bai Yu felt in this moment that he’d been accorded importance. The kind of importance that saddled his person with intense feelings.

“…Okay.” He mumbled his answer with a nod, not knowing what to do with his arms or legs. His imagination was running wild.

Isn’t Laoshi…being too *caring? Why’s he being so nice to me? Taking me as a disciple and taking care of me in every possible way…*

He’d been acting the role of Yi Yan’s student ever since Wang Xiaomie and Boss Wen left, and had therefore started calling Yi Yan “Laoshi.” Ten days had passed this way, and in those ten days, Yi Yan really had been far too good to him—so good that he made him hot milk every morning, so good that he’d made room in the fridge normally used for storing materials and weird skulls so that he could keep a bunch of fruit, candy, drinks, and snacks in stock for him.

At night, he’d say goodnight on WeChat. In the morning, he’d send the daily weather report along with his morning greeting, reminding him to bring an umbrella and wear more clothing if there was a chance of rain.

He was being so good that he’d even invited him out to the movies the other day. The mental image of Yi Yan dressed the way he did, wearing 3D glasses and hugging a coke and popcorn as they watched *The Avengers*, made Bai Yu want to laugh.

After the movie, they’d even gone to an amusement park. When they headed home after going through some of the attractions there, Yi Yan exchanged his entrance ticket for a souvenir keychain charm to give him. Bai Yu, who’d been eating a stick of cotton candy bigger than his head, nearly burst into tears at the sight of the charm in Yi Yan’s palm. It was only the second time he’d ever eaten cotton candy in his entire life. His grandpa had disappeared when he was a child, and his dad was always busy looking for him. When his dad also disappeared later, his mother spent a few years searching for him before falling ill and passing away shortly after. With his family hit by one wave of bad luck after another, everyone was under far too much pressure to pay attention to a child. Bai Yu being a boy on top of everything else made him even easier for everyone to ignore, so it had always been rare that he got to taste sweet flavors like this.

In many ways, Yi Yan had used these ten days to grant every desire he'd ever had from childhood onward. He even bought him clothes and shoes, and used all sorts of excuses to send him red packets on WeChat. There was never much money in each packet, as if he knew Bai Yu would reject them otherwise. They were ostensibly meant for him to run errands buying foodstuffs, with whatever money was left over being his tip. But in the end, those snacks ended up in his stomach as well.

If a man treated someone that well, and even used various excuses to insert himself into that person's life, what did that mean?

That day, Bai Yu secretly went online to seek the collective wisdom of his wide pool of internet friends.

One net friend said, "He obviously likes you!"

Another net friend said, "Tch, I didn't come here to get pelted with dog food!"

Bai Yu was silent. *Does this mean Laoshi likes me?*

He dumbly followed Yi Yan to KFC, where the customers and employees alike all stared at this strange combo in astonishment. Bai Yu had never imagined that Yi Yan would take him to eat fast food. After all, Yi Yan's appearance made him seem like he lived in an entirely different world from the one this sort of food belonged to.

To top it all off, Yi Yan also bought him a kid's meal.

Bai Yu stared blankly at the hamburger with the little flag stuck in it, then at the soft little lion plush. "Er… Laoshi…I…I'm already over twenty!"

Kid's meal aside, you even asked the employee for a toy! He was laughing when he looked at me!

“What, don’t you like it?” Yi Yan frowned, looking more astonished than Bai Yu was.

“I don’t *not* like it…” Bai Yu scratched his cheek as he said, “These things are all for kids, so there’s no need to get ’em for me…”

Yi Yan’s furrowed brow smoothed out at that. He reached out to muss Bai Yu’s hard head of short hair with a warm hand. “In my eyes, you’re also a child in need of love.”

The snap of melting ice sounded from within his cup of cola.

When Bai Yu regained his senses, his face was explosively red. His eyes, so stark in his dark face, were now wet with unshed tears. He hurriedly ducked his head to eat.

Yi Yan, meanwhile, was in fact uninterested in this sort of food, so he merely kept him company with a smile.

Boys always tended to eat pretty quickly, and Bai Yu was the type to wolf everything down as well. Once he’d swallowed his last bite of hamburger, Yi Yan then said, “You should stay at my house for the time being, until they come back.”

“Cough cough cough!”

“Don’t eat so fast. Did you choke on it? Hurry and drink something.” Yi Yan pushed the iced cola over to Bai Yu before continuing, “Didn’t you say they’d be gone for a month? And during this month, are you cooking your own meals or ordering takeout?”

“…Ordering takeout.”

“It’s fine to eat fast food on occasion,” Yi Yan said with a sigh, “but you should try to eat more homemade meals. You’re my disciple, and I need

to cook every day anyway, so you might as well move in with me for now."

Bai Yu's mouth gaped open. "But…"

"No need to say anything," Yi Yan said with a narrow-eyed smile. "It's decided, then."

Bai Yu fell silent.

Bai Yu went home with Yi Yan.

When facing someone you disliked, it was easy to find a hundred different reasons to reject or ignore them, whether they were trying to meet up for a meal or message you on WeChat. But when faced with someone you both liked and trusted, you wouldn't think he was being too hasty if he said "Come home with me." Rather, you'd find yourself blushing, your heart racing, acting shy while secretly looking forward to the event.

Bai Yu carried his unfinished cola in his hands as he walked behind Yi Yan with lowered head, his face red as a monkey's butt as he looked at the tall, straight back of the person in front of him. He felt like a girl going to her boyfriend's house for the first time.

He liked Yi Yan a lot…

He also had certain fantasies about Yi Yan. Maybe everyone who'd lacked a family's warmth in their childhood tended to like people who were mature, gentle, forgiving, and older than them. They were starving for love, after all.

Bai Yu had previously assumed he'd find a mature, older-sister type. But after all these years, he'd come to realize that there were more girls out there than there were gold bars in the national treasury, and also that they were far harder than gold bars to obtain…

But Yi Yan seemed to have similar intentions toward him. Bai Yu, in his twenties and currently longing to find his other half, was truly both conflicted and hopeful.

The straw met the bottom of the cup with a loud slurping noise.

Acting indecisive and vague would only bring sadness in the end. After hesitating for who knew how long, Bai Yu decided to get straight to the point and make his confession, then see if the other man thought of him the way he suspected. But it was best to try broaching the topic indirectly first—if he’d misunderstood, it would only make things awkward for both of them.

He mentally prepared himself, saying, “…Laoshi, why are you so nice to me?”

The man walking in front of him paused.

Yi Yan didn’t turn around. Only his gentle voice wafted back to Bai Yu, accompanied by the sound of his footsteps. “Because you’re my disciple.”

“B-but even if I’m your disciple, it feels like you’re a little *too* nice… You’re spoiling me like I’m a little kid.” There was even a stuffed lion toy in his backpack at this very moment.

“Mn…about that.” Yi Yan turned his head slightly. There was a soft light hidden in the corners of his narrow eyes, and Bai Yu couldn’t tell if his tone was joking or serious. “It’s probably because you’re so well-behaved that I can’t help but want to care for you. I’d even be willing to spoil you for a lifetime.”

…This means he likes me, right?! This definitely means he likes me, right?!

No, don’t get hasty! You’ve gotta stay calm, Bai Yu! Lemme toss him another fastball!

Bai Yu blushed as he haltingly said, “Then does Laoshi have any girls he likes?”

He was too busy lowering his head in embarrassment to see that Yi Yan’s expression had stiffened slightly at his question, His fingers curled into fists before straightening out again, after which point he recovered his smile and responded, a painfully wistful look in his eyes. “Yes.”

Yes.…

Yes…

The paper soda cup was crushed flat. The plastic cover and the straw both popped out in the process, a few drops of brown liquid splashing Bai Yu's hand as he listlessly tossed it into a nearby trashcan.

Frick, he'd been rejected.

Bai Yu felt horrendously grieved. In an attempt to cover up his embarrassment, he threw out a few casual lines. "Heh heh, so you already have someone you like! Why haven't I ever seen her come over before, then? Does she not live in the area?"

The two kept walking, but Bai Yu's legs were now so obscenely heavy they felt filled with lead.

He saw Yi Yan shake his head. "No, it's not like that—she's already passed away. It was many years ago now."

Bai Yu blinked in surprise. For the first time in his life, he felt a secret glee at the fact that someone else had passed away. He silently cursed himself out for this, even as little red flowers started floating around his head.

"Come to think of it, the two of you are really very similar. You have the same big eyes, your skin tans much quicker than most people, and you both have that same loveably silly personality," Yi Yan said with a smile.

Hm?! What's that supposed to mean? Is he treating me like a replacement?!

Bai Yu truly understood, now, why guys on the dating market often kept heart pills at the ready. How else could you handle this effin' rollercoaster of up-and-down emotions?

“Then are you using me as her replacement?”

“No, of course not.” Yi Yan looked back at him in shock. “Why would you ever think such a thing? You are one person; she was another. I would never get the two of you mixed up. It’s been many years since she passed. These days, whenever I think of her, it’s more reminiscing than anything.”

Bai Yu was so excited that he couldn’t stop stuttering: “Th-th-th-then…”

An amused Yi Yan asked, “Then what?”

“Then do you like me?!”

He yelled loudly, only to immediately regret doing so. He wanted nothing more than to make a panicked run for it at the sight of Yi Yan turning around. If Yi Yan made a disgusted face, Bai Yu felt like he would jump right into the nearest river and drown himself.

But he didn’t. Yi Yan showed no disgust, or loathing, or even all that much surprise. He only stared blankly for a moment, then smiled softly as he reached out to gently poke Bai Yu’s forehead…

He said, “I’m honored.”

In that moment it was as if spring had come, the flowers were blooming, and all the birds were singing in unison.

Bai Yu threw himself headfirst into Yi Yan’s embrace.

***

“It’s over.”

“Mn.”

“We’re done for!”

“Mn.”

“What’s *mn* supposed to mean?! Do you think we should hurry back early? Who knows what Yi Yan could be planning by making Bai Yu his disciple? He could be planning to use him against us.”

Wang Xiaomie was anxious. An Xie had already left, but he’d given them a lot of clues about Yi Yan, saying that killing “nonhumans” had become an obsession for the man, and that he’d climbed Mount Qi many times over the past twenty years with the intention of killing An Xie.

If he and Wen Fengjin delivered themselves to his doorstep, wouldn’t that just make Yi Yan want to eliminate them? In that light, even the reason behind him taking Bai Yu as a disciple had to be seriously considered.

Wang Xiaomie was spinning in circles with worry, while Wen Fengjin was stroking Mu Yi’s big lizard head. That’s right…he was actually in a good enough mood to go petting monsters.

“Wen, Feng, Jin!”

Wang Xiaomie let out a roar, causing Mu Yi to turn and make a break for it. Wen Fengjin, hand still halfway in the air, responded to Wang Xiaomie’s anxiety by merely retracting his hand, tilting his head, and uttering a single, “Mn.”

That was the most perfunctory response you could possibly give. Wang Xiaomie fumed. …*You’re dead meat! I’m gonna beat you to death right now!*

It was only when he saw Wang Xiaomie was well and truly angry that Wen Fengjin lazily waved a hand at his little monsters in the distance. Once Mu Shi approached, Wen Fengjin petted the creature's head as he said, "It's true that he's out to get us, and it's also true that he won't hurt Bai Yu."

Wang Xiaomie furrowed his brow at that. "Why's that?"

Wen Fengjin laughed. "Because you see, he…"

Chapter 68:
The End of Tenderness

DAWN BROKE VERY EARLY in the summer. A refreshing breeze lifted the curtains as it blew inside.

Just as Bai Yu was climbing out of a soft bed, wearing a white vest and hotpants, the door opened slightly. A girl with lightless eyes and a blank face poked her head in to quietly say, “Xiao-Bai, it’s time to eat.”

As he walked over to pat her on the head, Bai Yu wasn’t sure if he should laugh or cry. “Er, Xiao-An, could you not call me Xiao-Bai? That was the name of a hamster I used to have.”

Xiao-An happened to be that same Sailor Scout who’d been following Yi Yan. The latter had already told him that Xiao-An was a puppet he’d created, but despite knowing this, Bai Yu just couldn’t bring himself to treat someone who seemed as real as Xiao-An like she was a robot.

Xiao-An quickly nodded at Bai Yu’s words. “Da-Bai, it’s time to eat.” She let go of the door handle and ran to the dining room.

Amused yet annoyed, Bai Yu opened the door with practiced ease and walked over to the dining table, where a neatly dressed Yi Yan crooked his finger with a smile and poked Xiao-An in the forehead as she circled around him.

He picked up a mug of hot milk and placed it in front of Bai Yu. “Drink up. You don’t tend to have much of an appetite in the morning, so I

bought some congee and pickled vegetables from downstairs. When you're hungry, you can get some snacks from the shop's fridge."

"Okay."

Bai Yu lowered his head to drink his congee, but he peeked out of the corner of his eye to watch Yi Yan peacefully eating breakfast with a spoon.

It had been three days since they'd had that conversation, and three days since he'd started living at Yi Yan's house. The other man was still taking care of him as considerately as ever. He was also acting extremely familiar whenever they interacted with each other—so familiar, in fact, that Bai Yu started to feel as if he'd become part of Yi Yan's family.

This wasn't a *bad* thing, it was just… It felt as if he was being treated like a child, alongside Xiao-An. Bai Yu silently ate his congee, feeling like there was surely something wrong here. Was this how a romantic relationship was supposed to work? *You aren't using my lack of experience to make an ass of me, are you? Sigh…*

"Bai Yu." Yi Yan suddenly called his name.

Bai Yu, lost in thought, looked up with a dazed expression.

Yi Yan couldn't help shaking his head with a laugh at his foolish appearance, saying, "I'll be going to Mount Qi in two days' time. There's an extraordinarily powerful nonhuman there, a hanba."

"A hanba?!" Bai Yu was so frightened by this information bomb that he knocked his bowl onto the floor. "Aren't hanba just a legend?! How could one show up in the modern day?"

Sure, this place had jiangshi and a few fushi and also walking corpses that people purposely refined, but a hanba? You had to be kidding! There were strenuous requirements for one to be made. Extremely exacting

conditions, plus tens of thousands of blood sacrifices, and a deep and powerful grudge… If there really was a hanba, how had it manage to fulfill all of these?!

“War…” Bai Yu muttered to himself.

“Yes, it is indeed war.” A look of admiration crossed Yi Yan’s face. He braced his folded hands against the table. His ever-present smile completely vanished, replaced with a cold and detached somberness that Bai Yu found unfamiliar. “From the moment I first discovered him, I’ve considered him the greatest existing obstruction to the law. I refuse to give up on eliminating him, whether it takes ten years or twenty.”

Bai Yu was too shocked to speak.

“Are you having trouble understanding?” Yi Yan shook his head with a smile. “It’s all right if you don’t understand. It’s a long-cherished ambition of mine, after all. That hanba was already there twenty years ago, but… Heh heh. Let’s not bring that up just yet. To be honest, that couple you were living with before were an even rarer type of nonhuman. A hanba would be considered inferior by comparison.”

Bai Yu fell silent. He thought of Wang Xiaomie, who made lots of delicious food every day and felt like a college roommate, and Wen Fengjin, who was somewhat cold and arrogant and antisocial, but never showed a hint of ferocity on his face.

He said, with a hollow laugh, “Are you sure you didn’t get something wrong somewhere—”

“Bai Yu!”

Bai Yu’s whole body shook at Yi Yan’s disapproving gaze. Some sort of emotion flashed through those eyes and disappeared again in an instant.

Before Bai Yu could figure out what it was, he heard Yi Yan say, “On top of that, according to my investigations, they share a certain type of relationship.” He quirked his lips. “Don’t tell me they never said anything to you?” He laughed at the clueless look on Bai Yu’s face. “Heh heh. It looks like they didn’t trust you, after all.”

These words were spoken in a carefree, teasing tone, but carried a subtle hint of ridicule. Bai Yu’s fingers twitched slightly against the table. “It’s not like that. They’re really nice to me!”

“Heh heh… Monsters like that would never be so friendly with normal people. If they aren’t scheming to get some something out of you, then they’re simply doing it to amuse themselves.”

Bai Yu furrowed his brow at that. “But…”

“No need to say anything else.” Yi Yan interrupted him, unclasping his fingers to rest his face on one hand as he continued to exert invisible pressure on Bai Yu. “I have another piece of bad news for you. That place happens to have been Bai Cheng-laoshi’s last known location. The Artisans I hired also got back to me a few days ago. I honestly didn’t want to tell you this, Bai Yu. Bai Cheng-laoshi most likely…died at that hanba’s hands.”

That honest, naïve, and youthful face instantly developed a sheen of cold sweat and a terrified expression. Droplets of water fell with the deep weight of grief.

Xiao-An sat in her chair, staring at them in incomprehension.

The air gradually solidified into a desperately awkward atmosphere. Yi Yan gazed in cold silence for a long while. The youth across from him cried in an increasingly heartbroken manner.

Yi Yan suddenly let out a sigh, causing that ice-cold pressure to shatter in an instant. He reached out across the dining table to comfortingly caress Bai Yu's cheek. That darker-than-average skin was healthy and full of a youthfully robust vitality. The pale hand stroked and wiped at it, fingers causing those wet tearstains to disappear on contact.

"Forget it…" It was unclear whom Yi Yan was saying this for, but he quietly and tiredly sighed. "Forget it…"

He stood up and went over to Bai Yu's side, reassuringly pressing the silently crying youth against his chest. His usual faint smile returned once more to his face, but it now held an indescribable note of defeat.

"My grandpa…really isn't coming back?" Bai Yu sobbed, clutching at his shirt in a death grip.

Yi Yan closed his eyes. "That's right. He's never coming back again, nor is he able to."

"Ooh…"

"Don't think about it. I'll take care of everything—I'm the only one who should be doing this." Yi Yan murmured, "I was out of my mind to have told you all this. You just need to live the life you want… My only…"

"Only what?" Bai Yu lifted his head from Yi Yan's chest, not having heard clearly.

But Yi Yan only shook his head before hugging him again. "No, it's nothing."

Silence fell.

***

In the depths of the mausoleum, Wang Xiaomie squatted by the man-made underground river with a cloth in his hands, while Wen Fengjin stood behind him.

Within the river, a big, blood-colored lizard and other large monsters let out a cacophony of roars and howls, baring their fangs and claws as they tore into each other. The underground river surged over its banks to splash against the flagstones because of the tussle.

But while this might look like a scene of great violence, it was really more of a group of lion cubs play-fighting under the protection of the pride. In other words, they were just having a bit of fun.

The soft, gelatinous Mu Shi was sent flying directly toward the shore, droplets of water splashing through the air. Expressionless, Wen Fengjin raised an arm high and caught it easily. Inertia caused the flexible jelly to bounce a few times in the grasp of those sharp-nailed fingers with an audible *boing* before Wen Fengjin tossed it down.

Wang Xiaomie reached back to pluck it from the air without even a glance, then pulled it into his arms and started rubbing it dry with the cloth. *“Chirp, chirp.”* Mu Shi softly and cutely rolled around on his knees while making strange laughing noises.

The next instant, another small monster was sent flying from the water. Wen Fengjin caught it out of the air, shook it off with a cold and disdainful look on his face, then looked down at Wang Xiaomie squatting on the floor.

Wang “Mama” Xiaomie’s mouth twitched as he placed Mu Shi on the floor, then opened the cloth to accept the next small monster and continue

his drying. Mu Shi, meanwhile, turned and made a run for it, chirping away as it threw itself headfirst into the river again.

Wang Xiaomie, who just got splashed in the face, was speechless. *Unfilial son!*

“Heh heh…” Amused by his appearance, Wen Fengjin let out a laugh —only to get a soaking wet cloth tossed straight at his face in the next instant. It made contact with a very loud *slap* that hurt just to hear.

Wen Fengjin was silent.

Placing the little monster on his knees back on the ground, Wang Xiaomie watched without surprise as it rejoined the fun, before standing up with a sigh. The bitter medicinal aroma behind him drew closer, and Wang Xiaomie closed his eyes as he leaned back into it. Sturdy and wide. Yes, these pecs got a full score.

“What’s the matter with you lately? Why do you look so unhappy?”

Wang Xiaomie could feel the man behind him sniffing at his hair with the tip of his nose. He was probably wearing a joyful expression on his face, too. After all, Wang Xiaomie felt soft lips pressing again and again against the top of his head.

Naughty “children,” a headache-inducing partner, a friend he could chat with. These were all things Wang Xiaomie had endlessly pursued over the course of two lifetimes. Ever since the day An Xie and Wen Fengjin told him about Yi Yan, Wang Xiaomie had been thinking:

Were humans simply born greedy?

Once they obtained something they liked, they would be happy. To maintain that joy, they’d keep as tight a grip as possible on the thing they’d obtained. To keep as tight a grip as possible on that thing, they’d endlessly

pillage and fight, paying no heed to who else might be hurt in the process. Just as Yi Yan felt about nonhumans, as Wen Fengjin felt about him, as he felt about all this happiness before him.

With his perfect, gentlemanly looks, he looked incredibly attractive in his crimson robe, black hair hanging loose. It captivated Wen Fengjin whenever he dressed that way. So when that ever-lively, gently smiling face revealed a dark side, it made one's heart skip a beat just as much.

"I've been having…this bad sort of premonition. This is actually the first time in all my years that I've felt such a strong omen that I'm about to die."

Wen Fengjin paused in the middle of his kissing. His lips curved upward in a smile that filled even his long, narrow, and inhuman eyes as he said, "Are you worried about me, Shixiong? I'm very happy."

Wang Xiaomie shook his head, then turned to look at him. "Fengjin."

"Hm?"

"Can you die?"

Silence fell. Wang Xiaomie lowered his head with half-closed eyes, catching a lock of Wen Fengjin's silver hair from where it fell over his shoulders and twirling it in circles around his slender fingers. "I've been thinking these past few days. If you know Yi Yan's true identity, and knew that he'd been plotting something from the start, and even know An Xie… then do you and An Xie have some sort of arrangement that you haven't told me about?"

"Heh heh heh…" Wen Fengjin chuckled as he bent down to take Wang Xiaomie's ear into his mouth. "You're scaring me with how sharp you are today, Shixiong."

“Enough messing around!”

Wang Xiaomie let out a sigh. He donned a serious expression, turned fully around and gave Wen Fengjin’s long hair a tug, then said, enunciating clearly under the man’s wide-eyed gaze of astonishment, “Even the weakest and most ordinary person can turn tough and unyielding if you cross the line with them! I’m the same, understand?! Fengjin—kill Yi Yan.”

Wen Fengjin was silent. The pupils of those long and narrow eyes shrank into slits.

There was a cold detachment on Wang Xiaomie’s face that he didn’t notice, himself, as he continued, “If he really wants us to die, then we can only kill him.”

He had everything he wanted in the mausoleum. He had a family. He didn’t want to die. He wanted to stick to his usual motto of live and let live, but if the other party had planned to take away all his happiness from the start, then the only option was to kindly ask him to die!

Once those cold and ruthless words left his mouth, the long, narrow, and inhuman eyes regarding him seemed to blaze with bloodred fire, reflecting the figure that resembled a sword pulled from its sheath to reveal the light of its blade.

To think that tenderness that had reached its end could be so cruel and beautiful…

Wen Fengjin let out a heavy breath, his hands beginning to tremble. The next instant, he pulled Wang Xiaomie hard into his chest.

“Urk!” Wang Xiaomie was hurting in his grip, frowning as he pushed at him. “What are you doing?!”

“Let me hug you for a moment—Shixiong—Mian Deng-shixiong—”

He was far too aroused by excitement, his gentle mask no longer able to hide the frenzied madness in his gaze or his ever-widening smile. All he could do was press Wang Xiaomie's head firmly against his shoulder.

At last… He sniffed the bodily aroma on that black hair. *He's been stained at last…*

He'd finally stained his shixiong the way he wanted him!

Chapter 69:
This Journey

WANG XIAOMIE TURNED to look back at the tomb passage behind him. A few dejected little monsters came to a stop as he did so, emitting crestfallen cries as he gazed at them, beseeching him not to leave. *"Trill. Chirp."*

"Sigh." Wang Xiaomie cast a glance at this group of what an outsider would consider hideously frightful monsters, a softhearted look crossing his face without him realizing it. He squatted down, and Mu Yi, Mu Shi, and the rest immediately came up to circle around him. After giving each of them a pat on its big ol' head, Wang Xiaomie waved at them. "Go back."

"Chiirp…"

Wen Fengjin lowered his head with a smile. He'd noticed early on that not only were Mu Yi and the others pestering him like spoiled children, but that Wang Xiaomie himself didn't want to leave Mu Yi behind either. So, rather than shooing them off, he chose to poke fun at Wang Xiaomie by saying, "Mother, it's time to go."

Wang Xiaomie reluctantly got to his feet, taking Wen Fengjin's hand and following him out of the mausoleum. He kept looking back every few steps he went, and each time, Mu Yi and the others would lift their claws a tiny bit with the urge to follow after him, only to be stopped by the order they'd been given to stay and protect the mausoleum.

Numerous pairs of beady red eyes, all watery, fixed on his retreating silhouette.

Wang Xiaomie fell silent. *Dammit, I'm gonna cry.*

He hardened his resolve and started hurrying forward without another look back, tugging Wen Fengjin along so the man had to take large strides to keep up with him. He silently tightened his grip on his hand. "Fengjin, if you're certain of victory, it doesn't matter what you sacrifice. But the two of us have to survive to come back here."

Those long, narrow, and unnatural eyes flickered. Wen Fengjin said, with a quirk of his lips, "Of course." No matter the time or place, as long as the blood ritual between them still existed, his shixiong would forever be within his grasp. The strongest shackle that bound them could also, when looked at in a different light, be the safest guarantee.

Upon reaching the surface, Wang Xiaomie took the backpack Wen Fengjin had been carrying this whole time. Inside it were a few changes of clothing, a cell phone, a portable charger, and a few other random odds and ends. Having already changed into modern clothes back in the mausoleum, Wang Xiaomie pulled the phone and charger out of the bag, connecting them and turning on the phone as he raised his head to ask a question of the man whose gaze had never once strayed from his person.

"Why didn't you bring the casket this time? If you miscalculated and lost, it'd be perfect for burying me on the spot," he half jokingly said.

Wen Fengjin seemed to be smiling, yet not, as he tugged at Wang Xiaomie's collar to make him raise his head farther. Under Wang Xiaomie's surprised gaze, he leaned down to press their lips together, his own lips grinding harshly against Wang Xiaomie's.

This was a very quick and not-at-all gentle kiss, the femininely handsome man's full head of silver hair falling against his face like a chilly

waterfall. Wang Xiaomie had trouble breathing when lifted up like this. He hurriedly swallowed a few times, the inside of his mouth going numb. His Adam's apple bobbed up and down as the man lifted him up even higher with the same ease as lifting a toy, then wrapped his mouth around that protrusion on his neck.

Wang Xiaomie bit his lip to stop himself from groaning aloud. The tickle made him unable to resist wiping at his neck once they parted.

"I'm not taking it with me because I'm certain we can return here. If I really do fail, then I'll have you return here by yourself. Do you understand?" Wen Fengjin asked.

Wang Xiaomie's face was a little red, but he still couldn't help censuring him. "Bullshit. Do you think I don't know you? If you kicked the bucket, the one person you'd try to kill with your last dying breath—would, be, me!"

Wen Fengjin's smile widened at that, his lips moist from their kiss as he raised his eyebrows in a doubtful expression. "How could you think such a thing, Shixiong? Don't I love you?"

"Heh heh!" *You damn pervert—it's exactly because you frickin' love me that I'm afraid of you, okay?! Do you really think I'd let down my guard just because you acted like a toothless tiger and slacked off for a while?! Bah!*

Wang Xiaomie rolled his eyes as he said, "Can you really leave me to live on my own as a single man—er, zongzi? Would you really let me do things you don't know about in places you can't see? Maybe you'd find a friend to take over husbandly duties in your place, even? I'm not an idiot, Wen Fengjin!"

He had indeed overlooked Wen Fengjin's behavior lately, feeling like he'd become something resembling a good person. But when discussing strategies with Wen Fengjin the night before, he'd found himself tossing and turning inside the casket, feeling like something was off the more he thought about it.

After recovering his memories, he was sure he knew Wen Fengjin inside and out. And Wen Fengjin really was…villainous, blackhearted, unrestrained, and antisocial. A white tangyuan with black sesame filling—one wrong word and he'd beat your skull into pudding. He was genuinely someone who could say "I love you" and "I'm gonna beat your damn head in" in the exact same tone of voice.

In the past, when they were faced with danger, Wen Fengjin's favorite tactic had been to capitulate slightly to those righteous figures confronting them. And then, just as his opponent was jumping for joy at the thought that they were about to exterminate the demon lord, he would inflict upon them the greatest possible despair…

"Is there anything more exciting than watching as your opponent walks toward despair while overflowing with hope?"

Wen Fengjin had been standing in a pool of blood when he said this. At the time, the people who'd come to encircle the demon lord believed their spy had discovered Wen Fengjin's base, when in fact that spy had been captured on the first day of his arrival, skinned by Mu Yi and the others, and interrogated to death. The attackers were bursting with confidence and hope as they came to ambush the camp—only to be shot dead by so many arrows that they blotted out the sky.

Afterward, Wen Fengjin waded across that pool of blood with his heavily ill shixiong in his arms, a look of satisfaction revealing itself on his demonically beautiful face as he narrowed his eyes in a smile. He listened in rapt attention as he made eye contact with those people glaring at them from where they lay on the ground, breathing their last…

He said, “Listen, Shixiong. Isn’t this sound of shattering pleasing to the ear?”

Wang Xiaomie understood: He meant the sound of their hope shattering.

At that time, Wang Xiaomie had held himself together, because otherwise he would have peed all over Wen Fengjin’s leg. That was the time he became sure of one fact: Wen Fengjin should change his name to Wen Fengzi.[5]

“Wait!”

Remembering all this, Wang Xiaomie grabbed hold of the ends of Wen Fengjin’s long silver hair, eyes wide. “If you knew Yi Yan’s identity from the day we first went to Bai Yu’s place, then did you purposely let Bai Yu…”

Wen Fengjin’s plump, light pink lips curved in a scythe-like smile. There was no need to say anything.

“…You’re mean. You’re totally immoral!”

And here I was wondering why Wen Fengjin suddenly let up that day, when he’d been so against Bai Yu moving in before! So he’d already started scheming!

Wang Xiaomie tugged ruthlessly at his hair and bared his jiangshi-brand puppy fangs, wanting nothing more than to bite him.

Wen Fengjin raised his eyebrows, laughing as he said, “Are you going to start barking again? Do you want to bite me too? Heh. But you can’t. I’ll use domestic violence…”

Wang Xiaomie fell silent. *There it is! His Evil Moe Font!*

Given the choice between biting him and getting a beating, or restraining himself and not getting a beating, Coward Wang resolutely chose the second option, standing up in a huff and moving to call Bai Yu on his phone.

He’d contacted Bai Yu just the other day and told him to drive over, so now it was a question of how far he’d gotten.

“Xiaomie,” Wen Fengjin suddenly called out, “if Bai Yu…”

“All right already! I get it. I’ll keep my guard up!” Wang Xiaomie interrupted him, unwilling to be overly suspicious. “Bai Yu’s such an honest guy—how could he ever help Yi Yan do those sorts of things?”

“Do you trust him that much? More than even me?”

Wang Xiaomie’s mouth twitched at the sight of Wen Fengjin’s rapidly cooling expression. “Are you made of aged vinegar, friend? Anyway, you should maintain friendly relations with people. I’d much rather trust my friends than be suspicious of them.”

“You’ll be disappointed.” Wen Fengjin said this with resolute finality.

Wang Xiaomie sighed. He’d already mentally prepared himself for the worst. He had total faith that Bai Yu was a good person, but what if Yi Yan had tricked him?

The phone call still went through. “Hey, is this Da-Bai? It’s Wang Xiaomie.”

***

A small, white freight truck was parked at the foot of the deserted mountain road, but there were a lot of tire tracks around it, and Bai Yu had run into a few middle-aged men carrying building cement up the mountain as well. They said that some rich person had insisted on building a temple up here, and that they were all local villagers who’d been hired by the chief contractor to work on this project.

“Not only does the boss want to put up a temple, he even agreed to spend money on fixing the nearby mountain roads. And the old guy who watches over the run-down temple at our village can move over here too.”

“You really gotta wonder who this guy is that’s willing to toss so much money at us poor folk out in the middle of nowhere!”

The swarthy middle-aged men chatted and laughed as they continued carrying their loaded shoulder poles up the mountain.

Bai Yu had a blank look on his face as he watched them laboring their way into the distance. The ones able to build a temple on the mountain would probably be Xiaomie and his husband, right?

He thought to himself, *A human is thinking of hurting people, while a jiangshi thinks of building temples and fixing roads… Heh, what’s this world even coming to?*

As Bai Yu was rubbing his slightly reddened eyes, his phone suddenly rang. He hurriedly swallowed the lump in his throat and tapped his phone to see that the caller ID said “Xiaomie.”

“Hello.”

“Hey, is this Da-Bai? It’s Wang Xiaomie. Where are you now?”

“Oh, I’m right at the foot of the mountain. The car can’t get up there, so I’m waiting down here instead. Do you have a lot of stuff with you? I can come carry it for you.” Bai Yu lifted his phone to his ear, moving to open the car door.

“No, no, you don’t need to. Fengjin can get down there in just a few strides, and we don’t have anything with us this time.” Wang Xiaomie was laughing as brightly and warmly as ever on his end of the phone. “You just wait there for us. We’ll be down in ten minutes.”

“Okay…”

Bai Yu gave a short response and hung up. He had an ugly look on his face as he absentmindedly put down the phone and picked up the water bottle by his side, then pulled an ordinary little plastic medicine bottle out of his pocket. Upon it was a label that said “Vitamin B2.”

He popped it open to reveal also-ordinary little yellow tablets inside. Bai Yu stared at the bottle as if he were staring down a dangerous beast.

In his daze, he felt as if he’d returned to the day when Yi Yan told him his grandfather was killed by a hanba. He’d cried very hard upon hearing that his last hope was gone, and Yi Yan’s intense attitude softened in response.

“Don’t think about it. I’ll take care of everything—I should be the only one doing this,” Yi Yan murmured. “You just need to live the life you

want… My only…”

“Only what?” Bai Yu lifted his head from Yi Yan’s chest, not having heard clearly.

But Yi Yan only shook his head before hugging him again. “No, it’s nothing.”

He’d stayed silent.

“By the way, Bai Yu, could you…do me a favor?” Yi Yan looked at him with a steadfast gaze as he continued, “I must avenge Bai Cheng-laoshi, and eliminate the hidden danger that is this hanba for the sake of humanity’s future. You understand me, don’t you?”

Bai Yu could not object. Yi Yan was avenging his grandfather, so he should be grateful, and ought to assist him as well. “Whatever you need, I’ll help you with it!”

At that, Yi Yan pushed him slightly away, happiness written all over his face.

When he saw that Yi Yan was no longer looking at him with that serious expression, Bai Yu relaxed as well…only for Yi Yan’s next words to hit him like a bolt of lightning.

“What I need you to do is very simple, Bai Yu—I’m going to give you a bottle of medicine, and you’re going to divide that medicine into six doses, which you will put in Wang Xiaomie’s water. Don’t worry, this is specially made. There’s no way Wen Fengjin will find out.”

“No way!” A wide-eyed Bai Yu unconsciously raised his voice, saying, “What does this have to do with Xiaomie?! I can’t do that!”

“Give me a chance to explain.” Yi Yan frowned as he placated him in a slow, calm tone. “How could such a powerful Artisan as your grandfather have died in such a mysterious way? Wen Fengjin and his companion are acquainted with the hanba. Can you really bring yourself to guarantee that he wasn’t involved back then?”

Bai Yu lowered his gaze. “I…”

Yi Yan continued, “This medicine isn’t harmful, Bai Yu. The one I’m after is the hanba. Is it too much for you to think of this as my fallback to keep Wen Fengjin in check, just in case? If I don’t do this, could you guarantee that I won’t become another of their victims, just like your grandfather? I’m going to take revenge, whatever the cost! And those nonhumans must die as well! The journey to Mount Qi will be incredibly dangerous. If you lose contact with me…everything here will be yours. I’ve already written a will…”

In the light of morning, the pale green changshan and neat braid softened the man before him, and the years added a composed and gentle halo to his reasonably attractive form. Bai Yu was unable to envision him getting ruthlessly murdered. Nor was he able to guarantee that Yi Yan would be the final victim. But what he did know was that he didn’t want Yi Yan to get hurt…

“You’re sure this won’t cause him any harm?” Bai Yu heard himself ask in a trembling voice.

“Of course it won’t.” Yi Yan hugged him hard. “Trust me this once!”

“Okay…”

I trust you.

The iron-frame bed made an ear-piercing screech as it scraped against the floor, accompanied by the clattering of objects falling against each other.

Bai Yu, still looking at all the rare materials outside the partition, nearly jumped out of his skin with fright. He turned to glance at the partitioned-off area, but no more strange noises emerged from within.

“Did they accidentally bump a tray?” Bai Yu scratched his head, then went back to drooling over those materials. *If only all these precious materials were mine!*

Drip.

Drip.

Drops of bright red liquid fell and shattered against the floorboards, splashing into a smattering of small flowers.

Yi Yan put a hand over the right side of his face, blood dripping down through the cracks in his fingers. His brow was furrowed tight with pain, and his habitual smile had disappeared. His hand and most of his face were covered in sticky blood. When Wen Fengjin attacked him, he’d found himself injured before he could even make out how the man had moved. Yi Yan’s single uncovered eye gazed at Wen Fengjin, reflecting the figure who emanated a terrifying presence.

“Remember this pain, and do not ask any more questions that could displease me.” Wen Fengjin’s dark eyes fixed upon Yi Yan’s miserable figure. His mouth curved sharply, as if in demonic delight, filled with killing intent.

Without Wang Xiaomie to bear witness, Wen Fengjin had nothing to hide. The once-unparalleled demon lord met Yi Yan eye-to-eye, his gaze

filled with nothing but contempt and disdain.

Wen Fengjin's power and longevity gave him easy control over the life and death of others—after all, all plans were useless in the face of ultimate power. Would you feel bad about crushing an ant beneath your shoe? No. And killing people he didn't need was no different to Wen Fengjin.

"I don't care about your goals, because I'll kill you before you can force your little ideas onto my shixiong. If that happens, I'll rip your entire head off. Remove that feather pattern, now. Do you understand?"

"…I understand."

Yi Yan was silent for a moment, then picked up a bandage and medicine to simply and easily patch up the hideous wound that stretched from the corner of his eye down to his chin. The girl by his side, meanwhile, had stood there the entire time with no reaction whatsoever. Like a machine, unable to act without first receiving a command.

Yi Yan's tidied-up face lost its smile as he looked at the red pattern, which had stopped struggling under the medication. He took a long, thin pair of golden scissors from the tray, opened the scissors to cover the blades in medicine, and pierced them downward into the feather pattern's roots.

Raw power wrapped itself around Yi Yan's neck like a venomous snake, seeming to suggest that pressing the scissors down any farther would instantly twist his neck apart and rip his head off with an enormous spray of blood. And that was only Wen Fengjin's dominating aura. How many people did one have to kill in order to have such powerful killing intent?

The feather pattern beneath his hand started smoking and wriggling wildly, as if someone had poured sulfuric acid on it, emitting crackling

noises like it was burning. Meanwhile, the sleeping face of the person on the bed was still as peaceful as ever, not changing even as the feather pattern was completely eliminated.

But he was indeed very much alive—even through the scissors, Yi Yan could feel that heartbeat transmitting to his fingers! By comparison, the once-prized masterpiece standing beside him was practically a failed creation…

It wasn't that Yi Yan hadn't made ritually cultivated puppets before, but they either became unrecognizable killing machines in the end, or lacked human form.

Special blood…truly is amazing. How many years of ritual refinement must you need to create such a perfect work of art? And how much blood would it require?

"It's done." Yi Yan expressionlessly turned and walked over to the nearby sink to wash the scissors. His head hung low and an intense emotion burned in his eyes as his fingers, which had felt a heartbeat moments ago, lightly rubbed together. A normal person would need to spend a lifetime of diligence to acquire such a thing, but these monsters could obtain it with no difficulty at all. This was why Yi Yan so detested those nonhumans—it wasn't that races other than humans had no right to live in this world, but that their very existence disturbed the natural order! These were monsters that could place themselves above humanity without the slightest effort!

Wen Fengjin indifferently said, "Your payment will arrive in your hands tomorrow." He put Wang Xiaomie's shirt back on, then picked him up and carried him out of the room. Throughout this entire process, he

spared not another glance in Yi Yan’s direction. He’d lost his value, and so he was ignored.

After the sound of footsteps on the stairs faded away, Yi Yan ferociously dug his fingers into his palms.

Chapter 70:
A Choice That Shouldn't Be Made

HAND-IN-HAND with Wen Fengjin, Wang Xiaomie walked down the mountain, opened the freight truck's passenger side door, and climbed in.

The car door closed with a bang, causing the accessories hanging from the rearview mirror to sway.

Wang Xiaomie stretched himself out in the passenger seat and sighed, "Ai. We're going back! I've been here for a month without anything good to eat, just chewing on black donkey hooves every day. I'm dying for something with *flavor*!"

This line brought a smile to Bai Yu's previously somewhat downcast face, and he looked around as he curiously asked, "Why didn't you guys bring the casket this time?"

"Oh, that." Wang Xiaomie rubbed his nose. "I didn't let Wen Fengjin bring it. Beds are so much better—why insist on bringing that thing along?"

"You've got a point there," Bai Yu replied with a toothy laugh.

Wang Xiaomie narrowed his eyes. "Don't laugh in my direction, Da-Bai. Whenever you do, it makes me think of Darlie toothpaste."

Thus silenced, an aggrieved Bai Yu covered his teeth and started the car. He said, "I bought a bunch of snacks at the supermarket. You and Boss Wen can eat them on the road."

Wang Xiaomie's eyes immediately lit up, and he dug up a huge bag of goodies from the pocket next to his seat. The plastic bag on top had the

name of a certain supermarket printed on it. He pulled things out of the bag one after the other. “Chocolate bars, pineapple cakes, spicy beef jerky, savory mini sausages… Whoa, there’s even pickled pepper chicken feet! Fuck, you’re the best, bro!” He gazed earnestly at Bai Yu in the driver’s seat. “Don’t you worry, Da-Bai, I’ll pay for all your whitening face masks for the rest of the year!”

Bai Yu said with some difficulty, “No, I’m not dark.”

Wang Xiaomie shook his head with a bitter sigh at this refusal to accept reality. “All right, you’re not dark. You’re only at a level where you absorb light from the sun. In fact, I feel cooler just sitting next to you.”

Swoosh. Bai Yu silently choked down a sob at this perfectly aimed knife to his heart. *Stay strong, Bai Yu! You can’t cry here!*

Uninterested in the rest of the snacks, Wang Xiaomie first opened up the pickled chicken feet and beef jerky, turning around to hold the first bite up to Wen Fengjin’s mouth.

Wen Fengjin, who’d been planning to shut his eyes and rest, stared in silence at the ghastly white chicken feet, which reeked of spice. He didn’t open his mouth.

“You don’t want it?”

Wen Fengjin looked disdainful.

Wang Xiaomie huffed aloud. “Do you know much love and importance you’re being treated with when a foodie offers someone else the first bite of his food?”

Wen Fengjin stayed silent.

“Tch.” Wang Xiaomie watched him raise his eyebrows sky-high without ever taking a bite, and said with another huff, “If you won’t eat, then forget it. I’ll give it to Da-Bai instead.”

He then made to pull back his hand and offer the treat to Bai Yu. But in the next moment, the arm holding the chicken foot was grabbed mid-movement. Wang Xiaomie turned to look, and saw Wen Fengjin lowering his head to bite at the toes of the chicken foot, his slender, mostly black eyes gazing up at him.

In that instant, their eyes met, and Wang Xiaomie froze up.

Snap.

The chicken foot made a crisp snapping noise as meat and bone were bitten off. Under Wen Fengjin’s gaze, Wang Xiaomie felt like it was his own fingers that were just crushed between his teeth. That cold and somber gaze was as dark as the abyss.

Wang Xiaomie understood the meaning behind that look. He was saying: *I dare you to do it.*

He was stumped. *This is food aggression! You won’t eat it yourself, but you won’t let others eat it either?! I’m not gonna start fights with you!*

Wang Xiaomie quickly turned around with the rest of the chicken foot, his fingers still numb from the experience.

He looked down at the broken-off end of the chicken foot to discover that Wen Fengjin had bitten through its joints, and done so evenly, too. He’d even shattered the bones.

The crunching sound of Wen Fengjin chewing on bones sounded from behind him.

All the hairs on Wang Xiaomie's body stood on end. *…So…so what if you've got good teeth?! I'm not scared!*

He purposely started gnawing on the part Wen Fengjin just took a bite out of, eating a bunch of toes and leaving his burning mouth desperately sucking in cold air. It was at this moment that Bai Yu asked, "Xiaomie, what's up with your neck? Right there on your throat, it's red for some reason."

Wang Xiaomie paused, feeling a bit embarrassed upon remembering that Wen Fengjin had sucked at this spot when they were back on the mountain. "This is… I had some internal heat yesterday, so I pinched here a bit to relieve it."

Hearing a snicker behind him, Wang Xiaomie tightened his grip on the pickled chicken foot, wanting nothing more than to stab it into Wen Fengjin's mouth. *The hell are you laughing for?! If you hadn't put so much strength into it, there wouldn't be a bruise, and I wouldn't still have this red mark from it not having healed yet!*

Bai Yu responded with an "Oh" and kept driving. His voice was somewhat shaky. "Is it really spicy? Have some water." He pulled out a mineral water and handed it over.

"Thanks, my mouth's on fire." Wang Xiaomie accepted the bottle, twisted off the cap, and threw his head back for a few gulps.

Bai Yu kept his eyes on the road, listening to the gulping sounds beside him. His hands unconsciously tightened around the steering wheel. His palms were slick with cold sweat, nerves making his fingers both stiff and cold, but he didn't notice that at all.

Wen Fengjin, resting in the back seat, cracked his eyes open ever so slightly, lips curving upward at this sight before he closed his eyes again.

You've lost, Shixiong.

Wang Xiaomie put the cap back on the water bottle and placed it off to the side, then went back to chewing on his chicken foot. His long, ink-black hair hung over his shoulders, the strands curving into half circles that covered his expression.

With the water bottle safely back in its place, Bai Yu's tensed nerves relaxed, cold sweat dripping down his dark cheeks.

Wang Xiaomie shot him a glance. The truth was that Bai Yu wasn't at all ugly. His eyes were deep-set, large and round, and even had double eyelids, looking a lot like cat eyes. He had well-proportioned features and a straight, small nose, giving him an elegant look, and his face wasn't overly angular, but rounded, with a pointed chin. He also had very full lips with a natural upward curve. His naturally curly black hair stuck out in random places, and while his skin was dark, it had a kind of feline charm and vitality to it, easily earning people's affection in a way where he looked more attractive the more you looked at him.

This only proved that sometimes 'dark' and 'ugly' were entire worlds apart. A guy like this was much more distinctive than "the people's Prince Charming," and left a deep impression on people, to boot. So how was he similar to Yi Yan in any way? Did he know…

"Bai Yu, how're you doing with Yi Yan?" Wang Xiaomie asked.

Bai Yu froze up for a second, a panicked look flashing across his face, lips pressing tightly together before he finally said, "We…we're doing great. He's my grandpa's disciple, so he takes really good care of me. I call

him Laoshi now, but…” He tightly gripped the steering wheel, as if gathering his courage. A few seconds later, he loudly said, “But I like him! I-I’m already living at his house together with him!”

Wang Xiaomie and Wen Fengjin were stunned silent.

What the fuck!

Wang Xiaomie whipped around to look at Wen Fengjin, and found him also raising his eyebrows in astonishment.

He gulped and turned back to look at Bai Yu, who looked like a kid who’d just confessed to his family that he was seeing someone: shy, nervous, scared, and also a little bashful.

But that wasn’t the important point! The important point was…

“How could you get with Yi Yan?! Did he acknowledge that you’re lovers?” Wang Xiaomie’s worldview was shattered. He felt like his brains were about to bubble over.

“He took really good care of me after you guys left. And then, the day he told me to stay at his place for the time being, I also…confessed, and he… I’m pretty sure he agreed.” Bai Yu’s expression twisted with feeling. “I know you don’t get along with him…but…”

“It’s not because of us…” Wang Xiaomie interrupted, feeling a headache coming on. “It’s…”

“Xiaomie.”

Wen Fengjin suddenly spoke up. When Wang Xiaomie looked back at him, His Excellency the Demon Lord was smiling a devilishly captivating smile. “This is quite amusing, don’t you think? I see no problem with holding our silence about them.”

Bai Yu didn’t understand what Wen Fengjin meant. Assuming he was speaking up for him, he looked extremely grateful.

But Wang Xiaomie knew.

What Wen Fengjin meant was: This should be an entirely unforeseen accident, but Yi Yan was in a position diametrically opposed to theirs, so why not watch him make a fool of himself when the opportunity presented itself?

Sigh.… Swallowing what he’d been about to say, Wang Xiaomie looked at the bottle of water he’d just drunk from, and ultimately chose not to explain. “Anyway, the point is, you should be extremely careful when looking for a partner. Everyone has their own choices to make…”

Though some people should never be chosen to begin with.

Bai Yu didn’t reply, only nodding in silence.

Nobody said another word for the rest of the trip. It was as if anything they brought up after that mention of Yi Yan felt awkward to talk about.

Two and a half days later, the three finally returned to their villa neighborhood in the suburbs.

Wang Xiaomie’s complexion improved greatly upon returning to his own territory, a small smile appearing on his face. He stretched his back, stiff from sitting in a car for so long, and said to Bai Yu, “Thanks for going to all that trouble. You should hurry back to your room for a nap. I’ll wash up with Fengjin and head upstairs.”

“No need.” Bai Yu waved his hands, eyes shifting back and forth as he frowned with a lowered head. “I’m…going back to Yi Yan’s place.”

Silence fell. *A son once grown is beyond his mother's control, huh.* Wang Xiaomie let out a sigh, causing Bai Yu to lower his head in shame at having betrayed his organization by running into the arms of a homewrecker.

"Don't think about it." Wen Fengjin turned his gaze away. His chilly hand stroked Wang Xiaomie's nape, sending a shiver down his spine. Before he could react, that hand then gripped his chin and forced him to turn his head.

"And stop looking at him," Wen Fengjin said unhappily. "I'm tired. Come upstairs with me to rest in the casket."

Wang Xiaomie was originally about to push him away, but froze for a moment at those words, after which he raised his eyebrows and broke into a grin. "Heh heh heh, casket? We didn't bring the casket, remember? Heh heh heh heh."

Wen Fengjin fell silent.

Wang Xiaomie quickly pushed him away, laughing loudly as he charged upstairs. "I'm coming for you, Simmons! Yaaaay!"

"You put the medicine in his water?" Yi Yan's eyes narrowed in a smile as he asked, "And you're sure he drank it?"

The old-fashioned first floor was lit by warm orange lighting. Xiao-An sat quietly in the corner, playing with some sort of toy, while Bai Yu sat with his head hung very low. It was a long time before he finally made a noise of assent.

A powerful joy and excitement welled up in Yi Yan's eyes as he took Bai Yu's hands in his, gently consoling him. "You did very well. Thank you

for everything you've done for me. Don't worry, I'll take revenge for Bai Cheng-laoshi!"

"I feel like I did something wrong," Bai Yu suddenly said.

"Of course you didn't." Yi Yan frowned. "We're doing all of this to eradicate the hanba—to eradicate a future danger to humanity. They're all monsters who exist outside of the law. They were never meant to be part of this world to begin with."

Bai Yu didn't reply, and Yi Yan's expression softened. "We aren't in the wrong. No matter what problems may arise, I'll always protect you. I promise."

He pulled the weary Bai Yu into a tight hug, body swaying gently, and stroked his back in much the same way one might comfort a child. "You did very well… You did very well…"

Bai Yu let himself be pulled into that hug, lashes trembling on his tightly closed eyes. He didn't see Yi Yan's thin lips slowly curving upward as a strange light flashed through his narrow eyes.

You did very well. Really, very well!

Chapter 71:
Love Is a Ray of Light, and It’s a Goddamn Green One

IN THE DIM UNDERGROUND SPACE, a strange furnace was burning. Though the smoke was funneled outside the walls, and there was an air vent as well, it did nothing to change the suffocating heat of the room.

All four walls were covered in metal racks of the kind you saw when people were putting up roofs. Rows of strange ores were lined upon them, each with a label underneath it. There were also many wooden boxes and glass bottles arranged in the same manner.

At the mouth of the furnace, Yi Yan sat on a chair with his legs crossed, silently gazing into the fire. The crackle of burning wood and the orange glow of the flames bathed him in a warm light.

“The next step is to add dragon bones,” he suddenly said.

Bai Yu nodded, holding a small book in one hand as he walked over to one of the racks and followed the labels down to a certain wooden box. Opening the box, he found two small pieces of white bone inside.

“Dragon bones are the bones of exceptional snakes that lived for fifty years. Bai Yu, you must remember what I’m about to do next. Making copper tools is an extremely meticulous process. Whether it’s the reaction time, the degree of heat, or the materials used, we cannot allow even the slightest misstep.”

Yi Yan stood up and used a hook to pull open the tiny door in the center of the furnace. He inclined his head, signaling to Bai Yu that he should put the dragon bones in.

Copper tools were a kind of weapon that could restrain nonhumans. With just one of these weapons, you could kill a great number of jiangshi far stronger than the average human. This made them incredibly valuable—so much so that Bai Yu had only ever caught a few glimpses of them at his grandpa's place.

It was only after he entered Artisan circles himself that he realized being able to create a copper tool was a monumental feat, one that some Artisans never achieved in their entire lives. The process for creating such tools was something no Artisan would ever reveal to outsiders. They even insisted on only passing it down to sons, not daughters. If their sons had no talent, they'd rather take the technique to the grave than teach it to anyone else.

And now this craft, which countless first- and second-class Artisans spent their lives chasing after, had come into his hands! He'd assumed that even if Yi Yan's offer to pass techniques on to him wasn't just empty talk, it wouldn't happen for a good few years. He'd never imagined the man would start teaching him just a month later! Did he really trust him that much?

Bai Yu looked excitedly over at Yi Yan, and quickly tossed the dragon bones in upon his signal. Yi Yan looked back at him with a smile and said, "I know what you're thinking. I told you before that I cannot say if I'll live or die when I go to Mount Qi…"

He placed a hand on Bai Yu's head, slowly stroking it. "I'll give you everything I have…"

Those slender eyes and that smile were unbelievably soft. There were no lies in this moment.

Bai Yu knew that Yi Yan's interest in eliminating nonhumans was an obsession. He also knew that he…wanted to use him, but the way Yi Yan treated him was genuinely wonderful, sometimes. And he could see the intense emotion in his eyes whenever Yi Yan looked at him.

It was like one of those candies with sourness at its center. A child who'd never eaten sweets before would be unable to pass up such a treat. Even if there were a metal nail hidden inside, he would continue to savor it until it pricked his tongue and caused him to bleed. Like many other people around the world, he was willing to go to any lengths for that barest hint of happiness.

The red-hot weapon was pulled out with tongs, releasing an ear-piercing sizzle when placed into a basin of water mixed with all kinds of medicines. White steam rose from the basin as Yi Yan led Bai Yu over by the hand to take a look.

"You really are very talented. Even with my guidance, it was amazing that you could complete your first tool within a month." Yi Yan held his hand over the basin, saying, "This is your first golden tool. Do you like it?"

He nodded vigorously. "Uh-huh!"

The burning-red weapon gradually gained a golden sheen within the medicinal liquid. Bai Yu's hand slid up and down through the air as if he were touching that mystical weapon himself.

After a few minutes, the dazzling gold changed to a heavier and simpler copper-gold color. That glimpse of gold flashed in his eyes under the reddish-orange flames of the furnace, illuminating the infatuation within them…

Meanwhile, at the villa, by a king-size bed, two sets of pajamas had been tossed onto the fluffy carpet. Long, ink-black hair entangled with long silver hair.

The bed shook slightly a few times.

Wen Fengjin pressed a hand against Wang Xiaomie's chest as Wang Xiaomie lay back against the bed, eyes watery and red from pain. His collarbone was deeply sunken in, and he started gasping as if trying to soothe himself, staring up at the ceiling with a somewhat hazy gaze as his brow wrinkled into a deep furrow.

"This will hurt a bit, Try to endure it."

Wen Fengjin's long, narrow, and inhuman eyes darkened at the sight of Wang Xiaomie's discomfort, but his ice-cold hands continued applying pressure. "Feel the blood pact between us, and you'll feel a lot better."

Wang Xiaomie bit his lips so hard they turned white and softly nodded.

The next instant, those inhuman eyes suddenly filled with a red mist.

"Ah!"

Wang Xiaomie's tightly shut eyes immediately flew open, his sclera instantly filling with so many veins that they nearly blotted out the whites. He was in so much pain that he nearly threw himself off the bed, cold sweat soaking his forehead and the rest of his body, but the man above him pressed a large hand against his chest to keep him firmly down.

"It hurts! Aaaah! It hurts so much. My head—*aaah*!"

Wang Xiaomie opened his mouth in a scream, both hands sinking fingers into his hair as he shrieked wildly. He tore countless strands of long

black hair free, and with his body rendered immobile, started kicking with all his strength. “Aaah, it hurts, Fengjin! I really hurt! Let go of me—*let go of me*!”

In a few short seconds, sweat had already soaked through the sheets like water. Luckily, they’d prepared for this, and neither of them was wearing clothes. Wen Fengjin straddled Wang Xiaomie’s lower belly to keep him from moving.

When he saw that Wang Xiaomie was in serious pain, his face darkened until it was almost black. He curled his free hand into a fist, so tight that it began to shake.

“Just hold on. It will all be over soon. Xiaomie, don’t hurt yourself!”

Wen Fengjin raised his voice to address him, but Wang Xiaomie was so focused on his own pain that he was going insane. Wen Fengjin’s cheeks puffed out ever so slightly, and he simply reached out to restrain Wang Xiaomie’s arms, taking advantage of his struggling to catch both wrists with his left hand while continuing to press his right against Wang Xiaomie’s chest.

An invisible force encircled them, bringing with it a thick and heavy pressure. The black irises that almost entirely filled his eyes turned scarlet. Wang Xiaomie also expended every last drop of his strength, his chest rising in an arc so extreme that he was close to snapping his spine.

In a few seconds, all the blue blood vessels within his flesh showed themselves beneath his thin skin, swelling like they were blood transfusion tubes. That fair-skinned body that had once contained such endless vitality now began to turn blue-gray and withered as well. Wang Xiaomie’s wide,

veiny eyes gazed at the ceiling without focus. The protruding blood vessels began to extending toward his face.

It was almost like the hand Wen Fengjin was pressing against his chest had sucked all the life from his body.

“It hurts, I hurt, Wen Fengjin, I’m hurting so much…”

The hoarse murmur came mixed with two lines of trickling tears, as the person who’d been struggling just moments ago now lost his strength and collapsed back onto the bed as if he were dead. Wang Xiaomie’s appearance no longer had that delicate, gentlemanly gentleness of jade. It might be more accurate to call him a terrifying desiccated corpse.

He was in a lot of pain. Wen Fengjin knew this. He’d sworn to let his shixiong live a life of comfort, never suffering the slightest injury. Even as a corpse, he’d ensured he slept like a living person.

Yi Yan…

A livid Wen Fengjin released the now-exhausted Wang Xiaomie, then used his fingernails to cut deep gouges into his own wrists. Blood slowly dripped onto Wang Xiaomie’s lips.

A bitter medicinal aroma immediately filled the entire bedroom. Wang Xiaomie kept gazing listlessly at the ceiling, his mouth wet with dense droplets of blood that slipped through his cracked lips to fall inside.

Drip, drip.

As the blood leaked in through his lips, Wang Xiaomie stopped complaining of pain, and he became quiet and agreeable, his eyes turning fully red.

The blood pact had taken effect with this offering.

Ten minutes later, Wen Fengjin had cut himself multiple times, thanks to his regenerative abilities, and was still losing blood. The medicinal scent permeating the room was now nearly strong enough to drown someone. Wen Fengjin's complexion had also worsened considerably.

It was at this point that Wang Xiaomie finally started writhing wildly, then rolled over to cling to the side of the bed and vomited a puddle of red liquid onto the carpet.

Once he was done vomiting, Wen Fengjin hurriedly stopped the blood pact. He pulled over the blanket piled at the foot of the bed and lifted Wang Xiaomie to wrap him up and hug him to his chest.

He hugged the person in his arms with a death grip, kissing that ugly corpse's forehead. His love did not wane in the slightest, but only grew in affection as he rubbed his lips against that forehead over and over again, calling Wang Xiaomie's name until the corpse's flesh inflated like a balloon to regain its plumpness, his features recovering their former appearance. Broken strands of black hair lay scattered across the pillow, which—along with the dark sheets—now had a human-shaped sweat stain on them.

Once Wang Xiaomie was stable, Wen Fengjin carried him to the bathroom and quickly rinsed him off; since the bed was dirty, he carried him over to the second bedroom.

Throughout this, he didn't let go of Wang Xiaomie even once.

It wasn't until after nightfall that an extremely sore Wang Xiaomie finally opened his eyes. The first thing out of his mouth once he opened it was, "Hurts."

Wen Fengjin stroked his cheek with a hand, his thumb gently brushing against the corner of his eye. His voice was deep and gentle. “It’s all right. Everything is fine now.”

Wang Xiaomie took a heavy breath, cast a dazed glance over at Wen Fengjin, then responded in a tiny voice. “Mn.”

Wen Fengjin had no idea how vicious and demented his eyes looked right now, so terrifying that they could send anyone into a panic. The hand he had on Wang Xiaomie’s shoulder was also exerting far too much force—so much so that Wang Xiaomie still thought it hurt, despite his sense of pain no longer being as sensitive as it once was.

The first impression that crossed Wang Xiaomie’s mind upon seeing Wen Fengjin was: *He’s close to going insane*. Wang Xiaomie gulped, and comforted him. “Fengjin, I’m all right now.”

Wen Fengjin didn’t answer, merely quietly hugging him. Stiffly wrapped in the blanket like a silkworm, Wang Xiaomie didn’t dare excite him either. His little head merely stuck out, gazing with appreciation at his man’s high level of attractiveness.

Another half hour passed before Wen Fengjin finally seemed to wake from his trance. Upon seeing his expression calm down and recover its usual indifferent appearance, Wang Xiaomie hurriedly asked, “So how is it? Did we get rid of that stuff I drank? Gods, just the one time hurt this much, and we don’t even know how many times he was planning to have me drink it. Ai!”

While they were in the mausoleum, Xiao-Wenzi had guessed the different tricks Yi Yan might use on them, so they were fully prepared for that bottle of water to possibly contain some sort of poison.

If you wanted to delay the effect of a poison and keep Wen Fengjin from discovering it, you'd generally want to split it into multiple doses. So all they needed to do was forcefully expel it before it took effect. Wen Fengjin had also anticipated Bai Yu wanting to go find Yi Yan. He'd predicted everything with godlike accuracy. So they'd used the blood ritual to force out the poison that same night.

But I never thought the poison would be so strong! I nearly died of pain, dammit!

Wang Xiaomie cursed out Yi Yan seven or eight times, saying, "If you told me this poison wasn't deadly, I wouldn't believe you. Shit, he's ruthless…"

"I've changed my mind," Wen Fengjin suddenly said coldly. "I'm going to kill him right now!"

"Don't get hasty!" Wang Xiaomie wriggled like a silkworm in his arms, anxiously saying, "Didn't An Xie tell you that Yi Yan's not a simple character?! Never mind that he's got a weapon that can work against you guys—do you know how many puppets like that girl he might have?! He managed to get the upper hand against An Xie twenty years ago and escape with no problem, and An Xie's a hanba, of all things! How cocky do you think this guy is? Even if you can kill him, there's no way you'll come out of it in one piece!"

Even after Wang Xiaomie said all this, Wen Fengjin's expression was just as dark as before. By the looks of it, he still hadn't given up on his plans.

An angry Wang Xiaomie yelled at him, "Go ahead, then! If you want to make me a widower, then you just go on and leave! 'Slander clusters

around a widower's door.' I'll give you a green cap[6] every day of the week! Even your grave marker will be illuminated in green!"

Wen Fengjin was silent for a moment. "You wouldn't dare."

Wang Xiaomie chuckled at him. "You'll already be dead when it happens. So just see whether I dare to or not! Heh heh." He pouted as he sang, "Love is a ray of light, so green it'll give you a fright—la la la la la __"

Wen Fengjin silently pinched his face, then flicked a finger against his little noggin. "I'll beat you to death!"

Chapter 72:
Dalang, It’s Time for Your Medicine

THAT THURSDAY, Bai Yu returned. The secret he carried made him feel like such a huge traitor that he was a little overcautious as he came in through the door.

But this time, the first thing he saw upon stepping in wasn’t Wang Xiaomie sitting on the sofa playing video games or watching TV, but Wen Fengjin on the way up his stairs with some water.

He wasn’t sure if it was his imagination or not, but the second he stepped through the door, it immediately felt as if all the air had been drawn out of the atmosphere and turned him into a vacuum-packed ready-made meal. Something icy-cold brushed over the vital point that was his neck, causing goosebumps to rise all over Bai Yu’s arms. He shuddered and made to grab at that inexplicable coldness, only for it to disappear.

He had no idea that in the hundredth of a second after he stepped through the door, Wen Fengjin had decided to snap his neck—then remembered Wang Xiaomie saying, “Slanders cluster around a widower’s door, love is a ray of light,” and decided to spare him for now.

Bai Yu, having walked through death’s shadow and come out of it with nothing but goosebumps, carelessly thought, *The air conditioning sure is cranked up high today.*

“Wen-xiansheng.” Bai Yu quietly greeted him. Without Wang Xiaomie around, he was a little frightened by Wen Fengjin’s terrifying gaze.

“Hm.” Wen Fengjin responded with indifference, calm and still, his strange slender eyes casting a sideways glance in Bai Yu’s direction.

Bai Yu held his breath, feeling like a frog being stared at by a snake. The intense pressure caused cold sweat to drip from his forehead. He had the illogical feeling that they’d known about what he did from the start.

But how was that possible?! If it was discovered that he’d poisoned Wang Xiaomie, would he still be alive right now? He was pretty sure Boss Wen would’ve twisted his head right off his neck if that was the case.

“He’s resting.”

Wen Fengjin suddenly spoke up. The coldly handsome silver-haired man was like a god, appearing to gaze down upon Bai Yu’s face despite not having raised his head at all. When the younger man was on the verge of fleeing, he took his cup of water and headed up the stairs.

“Don’t disturb him today.”

Those last few words were accompanied by shards of ice that dispersed in the air.

Once the sound of footsteps faded away, Bai Yu gasped in a breath, raised a hand to wipe the sweat off his face, then hurriedly fled to his own room.

Meanwhile, Wen Fengjin reached the bedroom, shut the door, and set the water down on the bedside cupboard. He sat down on the side of the bed, the soft king-size mattress sinking under his weight and bouncing up again.

A sickly looking Wang Xiaomie opened his eyes, was startled by the expression on Wen Fengjin’s face, and hurriedly felt at his own chest. He breathed a sigh of relief upon feeling a slow but steady heartbeat within.

“I’m not dead, so what’re you looking like that for? Are you planning to turn into a huge monster to destroy the world and add to Ultraman’s burden, bro?!” *You look like the surviving family member of a murder victim! Scared me so bad I thought I was gonna open my eyes and find myself in heaven.*

Those strange, slender eyes were half closed, and Wen Fengjin’s lashes—so thick, black, and long that Wang Xiaomie often thought he might prick himself with them—cast a shadow over his already dark eyes.

Heh! Wang Xiaomie clicked his tongue, then carefully asked Wen Fengjin, “Are you…going to blacken?”

Wen Fengjin’s response was a quiet snort, almost—but not quite—smiling as he pinched Wang Xiaomie’s cheek and tugged the soft flesh back and forth. “He’s here.”

Him? Wang Xiaomie stared blankly for a moment before understanding what he meant; a bitter look crossed his face then, his words muddled thanks to the hand pinching his cheek. “So Bai Yu’s come back? Ai, looks like I’ll have to drink his medicine again. I nearly breathed my last from how much I suffered yesterday…and now I’ve gotta drink more before I’ve even recovered from the last dose.” Wang Xiaomie threw off Wen Fengjin’s cheek-kneading claw in an exaggeratedly tragic manner, then turned to huddle into the blanket. “How cruel. Yi Yan’s truly so cruel.”

“Feeling regrets?”

Wen Fengjin’s words were spoken drily, but an insidious light flashed through his eyes—as if he was going to snap Bai Yu’s neck at one word of regret from Wang Xiaomie. An instant later, Wang Xiaomie turned back to look at him, immediately catching Wen Fengjin’s look.

“I knew it!” Wang Xiaomie rolled his eyes, “What are you thinking, you!”

“Nothing.” The look disappeared in the blink of an eye. Wen Fengjin showed no hint of nervousness at having been caught red-handed. In fact, he smiled instead, his tone gently rising as he said, “I’m thinking of you.”

Wang Xiaomie wasn’t irritated by his refusal to admit it. He flashed a canine as he chuckled in return. He said, “Widower.”

Wen Fengjin’s smile froze on his face.

Wang Xiaomie continued with a wicked grin, “Love is a ray of light~”

Wen Fengjin fell silent.

“Green—”

“Shut up!”

“Pfft ha ha ha!”

As the little bastard Wang Xiaomie rolled around on the bed with laughter, Wen Fengjin gritted his teeth. His slender eyebrows rose so high he looked about to detonate, only for him to crack into a helpless smile not even three seconds later. He bent over to hold down his wriggling lover, whose brightly smiling peach-blossom eyes were clear as the sky after a rain.

A smile unfolded upon that gentle face. It also had a sickly pallor, lips lacking a trace of redness. The blood ritual had forcefully drained him of his life force. His eyes looked like those of someone who’d already died once, and he’d sustained great losses to his vitality.

This sight made Wen Fengjin's heart ache. Shixiong didn't want him to do anything drastic, so he made jokes in an attempt to find joy in their suffering.

His shixiong, his Mian Deng, his Xiaomie…would never make a joke inappropriate for the moment. He only ever strove to bring happiness and warmth to others. Even during those chaotic days a thousand years ago in a Northern Kingdom so filled with greed that the country stank of rot, he'd still done his best to think positively and affectionately of each and every person in the academy. From insignificant people such as the auntie who always gave him extra food in the academy cafeteria, to important ones such as Wen Fengjin, who'd given him a lifetime of misfortune…

His Excellency the Demon Lord had lived a cruel life, experienced all the pains and losses the world had to offer, and inflicted pain and despair on countless other people. But that didn't mean he was unable to feel heartache.

He could.

That heart of his was currently trembling and twitching with such pain that all he wanted was to shut this strenuously laughing person in that casket in the mausoleum, or swallow him whole into his belly. He wanted to entrap him, to prevent anyone else from hurting him.

And to allow himself to never hurt again as well.

But he couldn't do it. His Excellency the Demon Lord had failed once. He had forcefully imprisoned this person before him, for whom he felt such a bone-deep love, a love carved into his very soul, a love that had turned into a thousand-year obsession. And all it led to in the end was a lifetime of misery, overthrown for an attempt at a new start.

Wen Fengjin lowered his head to catch Wang Xiaomie's lips in his own, sucking and kissing, his lips dry and his mouth filled with a bitter taste.

Wang Xiaomie leaned his head back and closed his eyes, bashful as ever.

After a while, Wen Fengjin released him, having finally caused that pallid complexion he so disliked to flush a bright red. With his mood somewhat improved, he said, lips quirked, "I told Bai Yu that you need to rest today, and that he can come find you again tomorrow. I'll give you another extra dose of blood today and lie together with you, all right?"

Wen Fengjin lay on his side, propping his head on one hand to gaze at the person catching his breath beside him, the other hand brushing loose hairs from Wang Xiaomie's cheeks and tucking them behind his ear. His black, somewhat tight pants and gray V-neck shirt outlined his tall and slender figure.

Wen Fengjin was seriously *way* too attractive…

Wang Xiaomie, slowly panting from their kiss, brought up the blanket to cover the lower half of his face. His face was somewhat red as he smacked his lips. "Fengjin… Heh heh."

Boss Wen fell silent for a second, knowing by the sound of his foolish laughter that he was about to do something silly, but still responded anyway. "Mn."

Wang Xiaomie giggled quietly. "I, uh, I wanna *papapa*."

A beat of silence. Wen Fengjin's mouth twitched. "No, your body can't handle it."

“I know. I was just thinking about it. Let my mouth enjoy itself, heh heh.” Wang Xiaomie covered his face and bashfully mumbled, “Papapa.”

Wen Fengjin stayed silent.

“Papapa, heh heh heh, papapa.”

“…”

“Heh heh heh, pa—”

Zip. Wen Fengjin silently pulled down the zipper of his pants. “You say you want your mouth to enjoy itself, is that right?”

Both of them fell silent.

I have a suspicion that you want to do an H scene, and I’ve got evidence to prove it! Seeing that Wen Fengjin really did look ready to undress, Wang Xiaomie let out a scream before hurriedly yelling, “I don’t! I don’t want it anymore! Good night!” *Gotta hurry an’ sleep if I wanna live!*

Wen Fengjin let out a rumble of laughter at the sight of Wang Xiaomie wrapping himself up like a zongzi in the blanket. The bombardment of the low, husky sounds he made caused Wang Xiaomie’s ears to turn red at the tips, after which he was pulled into the arms of the man behind him.

The sweet little zongzi wriggled a bit, only for a hand to gently pat his body as Wen Fengjin said, “I won’t touch you. Go to sleep. I’ll hold you.”

At that, the sweet little zongzi rolled around, right into the man’s embrace. He adjusted himself to find a good position before sedately closing his eyes against that sturdy chest.

Wen Fengjin took a moment to admire this view of his shy, sweet little zongzi's sleeping face, then closed his eyes and tightened his embrace as he joined him in rest.

The two big zongzi, not needing to eat, slept this way for a full day.

When they went downstairs the next day, Bai Yu was sitting on the sofa, looking extremely unwell. That light-absorbing face of his looked so bad you might even call it "deathly pale."

One could easily imagine how uneasy he felt right now, like a spy just starting out in his profession. His heartbeat was almost loud enough for Wang Xiaomie and Wen Fengjin to hear it.

Seeing him like this lessened Wang Xiaomie's sense of dissatisfaction toward him quite a bit. He felt like he'd held all the cards from the start and had accounted for everything in his calculations, while Bai Yu didn't even know he'd revealed how he'd been going around with his heart in his mouth every day…

…It was actually a pretty nice feeling. Like he was one of those obscenely intelligent male protagonists in TV dramas. Wang Xiaomie pressed his lips together, struggling not to laugh out loud.

Hearing him coming downstairs, Bai Yu quickly turned to look. The sight of that normally fair-skinned face now showing the pallor of declining health sent a tremor through Bai Yu's heart.

This was definitely the effect of that medicine. The decaying smell of a body plagued by chronic illness was just like that of his mother who'd died. That scent of death, emanating from the person's very bones. Bai Yu was beyond familiar with this. Add to that Boss Wen having mentioned that Xiaomie didn't feel well yesterday…

It's all my fault… Bai Yu felt a soreness in his nose. He barely kept himself from bursting into tears as he walked up to Wang Xiaomie, head hung low.

Wen Fengjin walked past him, gaze sweeping over his reddened eyes out of the corner of his vision, and sneered silently. *Hypocritical human.…*

"Xiaomie…are you not feeling well?" Despite his best efforts, Bai Yu ultimately couldn't hold back, saying, "How about going to the hospital for a checkup?"

And what if you get exposed when we visit the hospital, you silly child? Wang Xiaomie's mouth twitched. He never thought the day would come when he'd get poisoned and still have to help the guy who poisoned him patch up his own lie.

He said, "There's no need for that. I probably just gave myself a stomachache from eating black donkey hooves back at the mausoleum."

Bai Yu curled his hands into tight fists. "But still…"

"Really, it's fine." Wang Xiaomie was afraid Bai Yu wouldn't be able to stop himself from confessing, which would ruin everything for them and An Xie, so he hurriedly changed the subject. "You must be hungry. I haven't eaten anything good in a while now, eh? Did you buy ingredients for the fridge, Da-Bai?"

"Huh?" Bai Yu couldn't quite wrap his head around this sudden interruption. "I mean, yeah, I did buy some…"

"That's good then." Wang Xiaomie patted his shoulder, pushed him over to sit down by the sofa, and said with a smile, "You and Wen Fengjin sit here and wait while I make breakfast." He then turned and made his escape.

“I…” Bai Yu was just about to say something when Wen Fengjin suddenly shot him a quick look.

Bai Yu, sensing the words “Shut up” in that gaze, fell silent.

The fridge was opened and then shut again, the clatter of vegetables being chopped and spice bottles being rummaged through sounding from the kitchen. Before long, the aroma of cooking began wafting through the air. It even managed to warm the freezing atmosphere in the living room. Wen Fengjin stopped emanating cold air, and Bai Yu’s stiff back relaxed. These familiar sounds and aromas were the victuals of the human world, the warmth of a home.

As he ate familiar food at the table, Bai Yu started to choke up with tears again. Halfway through, he went to the kitchen alone and filled up a bowl of soup for Wang Xiaomie.

There was no need to explain what was inside it. But he looked at the soup, then looked at Wang Xiaomie. Back at the soup, then back at Wang Xiaomie.

Back at…

He hesitated.

Tch. Even Wang Xiaomie was starting to feel anxious for him.

Wang Xiaomie looked over at Wen Fengjin. *Yi Yan making this little idiot poison me must be a joke, right?*

Perhaps it was that he’d made this bed and now he had to lie in it. Wen Fengjin returned his gaze with an entirely indifferent glance of his own.

Under Wang Xiaomie's increasingly irritated gaze, Bai Yu finally handed over the now-cooled soup. "Xiaomie, you should have some soup…"

There was a tragically solemn look on Bai Yu's face, almost as if he were the one about to drink poison. It was such an intense expression that it even reminded Wang Xiaomie of the line "Dalang, it's time for your medicine…"

(…And he was frickin' Pan Jinlian!)

Chapter 73:
The True Name of Love Is Corruption

As expected, the night after drinking that bowl of “die immediately” soup, Wang Xiaomie was once again pressed down and put through another blood ritual by Wen Fengjin.

This time was even worse, though. Last time, he’d still been able to scream for a while as he was drained of his life force, but this time, he had Bai Yu downstairs to worry about, so he didn’t dare make any loud noises.

He lay on the bed, so soaked with sweat that it was like he’d just been scooped out of the water. Below the bed was a puddle of vomited red liquid. He was naked as the day he was born, staring listlessly up at the ceiling. A tooth-marked cloth sat off to the side, also stained with blood. It was blood from his gums, due to biting too hard.

Wen Fengjin single-handedly lifted this mud puddle of a person off the bed. Wang Xiaomie was so sticky and salty with sweat that anyone else would have pushed him away in disgust, but this man buried his face deep in the roots of his black hair and licked at his forehead.

He’d fainted from the pain, only to be woken by the even more painful second wave. Wang Xiaomie felt like he was going to die. But having stuck it out to the end, falling into that familiar embrace gave him an incomparable sense of safety.

Thinking of how this man had looked riding on his lower belly just a moment ago, expressionlessly pressing a hand against his chest and refusing to stop the blood pact, Wang Xiaomie felt his nose start to ache.

Even knowing that he was doing this for his sake, Wang Xiaomie cursed him with a raspy little voice. “Jerk!”

Wen Fengjin paused a moment, then expressionlessly agreed. “I am good-for-nothing, to have let you suffer such hardships as this.”

Wang Xiaomie’s bone-dry lips trembled lightly as he pressed them together, his eyes reddening all over as they misted over with tears. “You’re not allowed to speak of yourself that way!” *My man is the best! He’s definitely not a good-for-nothing!*

Wen Fengjin laughed at that, using soft lips to brush the water from Wang Xiaomie’s eyes, so gently that his eyes narrowed at their touch.

The next instant, Wen Fengjin sliced open his own wrist, sucked in a large mouthful of blood, then lowered his head to feed it to Wang Xiaomie.

The effect of the blood ritual had yet to dissipate, and Wang Xiaomie’s eyes were a dark red, bluish blood vessels protruding from his pallid skin like they were drawn on in pen.

He was fed a large mouthful of blood. It was bitter, astringent, and a little bit sweet.

Hm… Wen Fengjin-brand Nongfu Spring water was seriously the best!

After being peacefully held like this for two hours, even a zongzi with extremely powerful regenerative abilities could not resist his own exhaustion. Wang Xiaomie’s eyelids kept drooping downward and his mind grew hazy.

At this moment Wen Fengjin suddenly said, “I won’t expel all the poison in your body, as we don’t know exactly what sort of poison this is. If

it has some other use, Yi Yan may be able to tell that you weren't poisoned."

Wang Xiaomie nodded. "I know."

Something flashed in Wen Fengjin's lowered eyes. In the end, he leaned closer to suck on those lips stained with his own blood, bringing them into a gently biting kiss.

"Ooh…" Wang Xiaomie hummed at that, and his last remaining reserve of energy slipped away.

Their parting made a tiny *pop* at the end of this kiss, and the face of the man panting for breath heated up even more than before. The other man easily lifted him up out of the blankets with sturdy arms, then started heading downstairs.

Bai Yu hadn't been able to eat or sleep well ever since doing The Thing. He now sat silently spacing out on the sofa, feeling as if his heart was being roasted over a small fire.

It was at this point that he heard footsteps from upstairs. He froze for a moment before standing to look toward the source of the noise.

It was a silver-haired man loosely dressed in pajamas, his face like a laurel-crowned prince in the dark of night. He came steadily downstairs, carrying someone in his arms. That person was also wrapped in a sleep robe.

Even standing in a dusky living room with the lights off, Bai Yu could see those few strands of dark hair hanging from Wen Fengjin's arms, as well as a small part of Wang Xiaomie's face. That face was far too pale. So pale that Bai Yu thought Wen Fengjin was carrying a lifeless corpse.

His pupils shrank as he impulsively shouted out, “What’s wrong with Xiaomie?!”

The sudden noise caused Wen Fengjin’s expression to change in an instant as he turned his head, violently sending a burst of qi, powerful as a greatsword, rushing toward the dark living room. “Who’s there?!” He actually hadn’t noticed anyone when he came downstairs.

At the last moment, the figure suddenly took a couple of steps forward, revealing a dark face.

That incomparably powerful formless blade immediately dissipated.

Bai Yu’s bangs were blown into a wild mess by a sudden fierce wind from who-knew-where. He rubbed his forehead, completely oblivious to the fact that he’d nearly gotten his skull sliced in half. *Where’d that wind come from? Forget it—it’s not important.*

He anxiously asked Wen Fengjin, “Uh, what’s happened to Xiaomie? Is he—” Had he ended up in this feeble state because of the poison Bai Yu gave him?

Before Bai Yu could ask further, an insidiously ominous bloodthirst glinted in those slender black eyes. That femininely handsome face was ice-cold in its lack of expression, but the gaze alone was enough to make Bai Yu freeze on the spot, too scared to ask any more.

Just when Bai Yu thought he was about to be murdered, Wen Fengjin’s expression softened, and he said in a lukewarm voice, “It’s nothing. I used too much strength; he’s tired.”

“Huh?” Bai Yu’s expression was a total blank for a moment, after which he seemed to realize something and immediately turned explosively red. “I-I-I—*cough cough cough cough*!”

Wen Fengjin looked at the youth flailing his limbs in embarrassment, then turned and continued carrying his partner to the bathroom, only to suddenly turn his head at the doorway and say, “Those face masks Xiaomie gave you—”

“Ah?” Bai Yu stupidly lifted his head.

The look on Wen Fengjin’s face was difficult to describe as he said, “Remember to use them regularly.” He then turned and walked into the bathroom. The door closed itself behind him, leaving a confused Bai Yu unable to make heads or tails of what the boss was talking about.

Once the bathroom door shut, an uncontainable burst of laughter sounded within the quiet space. Wang Xiaomie’s entire body was shaking from laughter as he winked up at the noticeably livid man above him. “You got scared just now, didn’t you? Ha ha ha! Bai Yu—ha ha ha—is so dark that you can’t even see him at night! Pfft ha ha ha!”

Wen Fengjin’s face frosted over as he muttered through gritted teeth, “I didn’t!”

“Ha ha ha—” Wang Xiaomie was laughing so hard his stomach hurt. “You came downstairs thinking there wasn’t anyone around, only for a ghost to suddenly pop up! Pfft ha ha ha! And you still say you weren’t scared. You were so not scared that you puffed up like a frightened cat! I never thought the day would come when you’d actually get scared! Ha ha ha, *cough cough cough*!”

Boss Wen was silent for a long moment before trying to recover his honor. “It was because he’s too dark,” he said.

Wang Xiaomie said, “Pfffft!”

For the first time, hearing the laughter of his most deeply beloved made Wen Fengjin badly want to punch someone.

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Seven days passed like this.

Five doses of poison had been drunk, and Bai Yu grew increasingly taciturn.

Wang Xiaomie picked up each bowl of poison and drank them down in an inspiringly magnanimous manner, looking quite brave, only to spend the night beneath Wen Fengjin, face coated in tears as he cried and wailed in pain.

The poison he vomited up gradually changed from red to white, which upon closer inspection turned out not to be water, but some sort of translucent string.

When Wang Xiaomie saw it, he fell silent for a moment, then turned to Wen Fengjin. He asked, “Am I spitting silk now? I’m going to turn into Spider-Man, become a New Yorker, and spend an intense night of passion with a beautiful, hot-tempered, kindhearted girl?”

Wen Fengjin fell silent. His face darkened, and that night, beautiful, hot-tempered, vicious-hearted Boss Wen fed this stupidly daydreaming skirt-chaser a little something wet and salty. And also gave him some calcium-filled milk while he was at it.

The half-dead, black-haired young man swore he’d never chase skirts again, not even verbally.

During the day, Wang Xiaomie—uncertain if they'd be able to successfully carry out their plan—used what free time he had left to run around all over the place. They went to an amusement park, to a locally famous temple, to all sorts of snack shops popularized by online influencers, and even tried their hands at rafting and bungee jumping. After all that, they then went to the aquarium, looking up to watch gigantic creatures swimming overhead.

Photo after photo was taken. These photos had a warmly smiling Wang Xiaomie, an always unhappy Wen Fengjin, and a gradually more composed Bai Yu. At first, he'd also bought frames for them. But there truly wasn't enough room for them all in the end, so he got a photo album.

Wang Xiaomie leaned against Wen Fengjin's chest, laughing incessantly at a series of funny candid photos. His complexion was hardly healthy. You could almost see black wisps of sickly energy winding around his body.

Wen Fengjin softly responded to his comments, pulling him to his bosom, as if all the evils of the world were cut off outside of that embrace.

Bai Yu's head drooped after he peeked at the contents of the album, his hands curling into tight fists.

A picture of the three of them was enclosed within a shell-embedded blue frame, sitting atop a counter on the villa's first floor. That moment in time and its accompanying emotions were frozen within a thin piece of paper. To Bai Yu, those brilliant smiles were the deepest possible mockery.

He left the villa and returned to Yi Yan's shop. Tightly gripping the straps of his backpack, he watched Yi Yan's intent face as he worked on his research, a bitterness spreading within his heart.

Happiness… If happiness is gained from hurting others, is that still considered happiness?

I'm a sinner. I deserve to die. Just let me go to hell.

As long as he could wipe away the crimes of this man whom he loved, he was willing to do it. A dismal smile crossed Bai Yu's face before he threw himself into Yi Yan's arms and made a final decision. He still couldn't bring himself to abandon this man—to abandon his first love.

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On September 17th, Wang Xiaomie drank the final dose of poison.

Moths fluttered toward a streetlamp that shed a single ray of light. Bai Yu, leaning against the lamp post, raised his head to look at it, only to close his eyes at the piercing glare.

He said to the person on the phone, "It's the sixth dose. He drank it."

He hung up without bothering to hear what the other person had to say, then weakly slid down to sit against the lamppost with his legs pulled up to his chest.

Neither poverty nor a tragic childhood had turned him into a corrupt evildoer. It was love, and that romance he desperately wanted to hold on to, that had succeeded where those had not…

From uncertainty to guilt, before finally resigning himself to commit his wrongs to the end… What contradictory, tangled creatures humans were. He'd done something unforgivable, and now he wanted to wallow in self-pity? It was so despicable it made you want to laugh.

Bai Yu narrowed his eyes, and really burst out in loud laughter. At himself, and at his twisted, deformed feelings.

He was going to pay for this! There was no point getting hung up on that. He knew it, he was waiting for it!

Yi Yan showed no dissatisfaction at the beeping by his ear. His lips quirked upward as he handed the phone to Xiao-An, who stood smartly by his side. “It’s a success.”

After saying this, his lips curved even further as he leisurely headed to his underground room, with Xiao-An following him. He went up to the wall and pressed a hidden button somewhere, causing the metal rack there to slide away and reveal a tiny space like a utility room.

There was a table in this little room, atop which lay a very simple jointed wooden puppet trussed in layers of white thread. As Yi Yan looked at it, a dark light flashed through his narrow eyes. “You’re mine now.”

He lovingly lifted the puppet and caressed it gently, closing his eyes as he rubbed his cheek softly against it. “My pride and joy, my greatest work.”

After saying this, he pressed his slender fingertips against an upward-facing knife on the table, the blade of which was already stained with dried blood. His finger slid across it as if he felt no pain, causing bright droplets of red to trickle downward. Yi Yan heedlessly used that injured hand to grip the string that wrapped the puppet, as if tearing the ribbon off a present he’d been looking forward to.

The white string was ripped apart, and both hands fell outward. The puppet sagged, only to be stopped by the string. It bounced where it hung.

Yi Yan lowered his head and laughed softly at the puppet. “Good boy. Tear apart the one beside you, and then…come to my side.”

At the same moment, over at the villa, within the darkness…Wang Xiaomie slowly opened his eyes.

Chapter 74:
I’ve Left the Warehouse, and I’m Feeling Fine

HIS BODY FELT LIGHT. *Too* light. Wang Xiaomie’s mind still held some conscious rationality, but the information his brain was transmitting was extremely muddled and delayed, like when the show you were watching had a dropped framerate.

One second, Wang Xiaomie thought he was in bed. The next, he saw the bedding in a mess, the teacups on the bedside cupboard knocked to the ground. He straddled Wen Fengjin as the two of them rolled back and forth across the floor, his hands wrapped firmly around Wen Fengjin’s neck, perfectly clipped nails already embedded deep in his flesh.

He was choking the man so hard that his fingers made hollows in his neck.

Wen Fengjin wasn’t struggling very hard. He knew perfectly well that Wang Xiaomie was being controlled, and exerting a lot of force in the process. If he were to pull Wang Xiaomie off by exerting his own strength in turn, it would inevitably break his lover’s arms.

The neck wrapped in Wang Xiaomie’s hands produced the sounds of cracking and healing again and again, an incomparably terrifying loop. Despite this, and despite Wen Fengjin’s lifeless complexion and his inability to speak, he still refused to fight back.

When Wang Xiaomie woke up to this scene, his muddled mind nearly blacked out on the spot.

What the fuck!

“I—can’t control myself!”

It took great effort for him to squeeze these words out through gritted teeth. He started to fight with everything he had to maneuver his own body, his fingers moving away from Wen Fengjin’s neck, only to press down again, as if they’d just cramped up. Some mysterious, unseen person was fighting for control of his body.

“*I don’t want—to murder my husbaaaand—!*”

Wang Xiaomie suddenly took back control of his body with a loud roar, falling backward onto the floorboards from the force of his struggle. Even with the carpet as a buffer, it made a very loud *thump*. He could almost feel the giant bump sprouting on the back of his head.

He tried to reach up to rub at the spot, only to discover that he’d once again lost control of his body, which was attempting to get up in an uncoordinated manner, like a stringed puppet.

Wang Xiaomie thought, *Goddamn, again?!*

“Xiao-Wenzi!” Wang Xiaomie raised his voice in a shout. “Quick, quick, quick! I’m getting up, I’m getting up!”

Wen Fengjin had nimbly gotten to his feet the moment he hit the ground, then tilted his neck back and forth a couple of times, which made the cracking noise of broken bones rubbing together. Seeing that Wang Xiaomie’s body was getting up again, he threw himself forward like a pouncing tiger without a moment’s hesitation.

A long leg swept out and kicked Wang Xiaomie’s legs out from under him as he moved erratically, like a zombie. Once again, his entire body fell backward onto the floor with a *thump*.

The intense burst of pain at the back of his head made Wang Xiaomie feel as if a new, miniature bump was going to grow out of the previous, larger one. *Hss…am I a double-scoop ice cream or what, fuck!*

And this wasn't the end of it. The next second, Wen Fengjin pressed his entire body down on him, one arm firmly wedged in front of his neck, the other catching hold of Wang Xiaomie's wildly flailing hands, fingers clasping around his thin wrists. His legs pressed down on either side of Wang Xiaomie's legs. Those long, narrow, and inhuman eyes met with a pair of panicked ones.

Within the underground room, Yi Yan watched as the puppet suspended in the air with string shook slightly and become unable to move. He snorted a laugh, then turned the hand attached to the other end of the strings.

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Wang Xiaomie began to wildly twist and turn beneath the other man. Their positions meant that Wang Xiaomie's soft, warm thighs were grinding against Wen Fengjin's crotch with a pressure that was neither too soft nor too hard.

Wen Fengjin's face darkened. "Stop moving!"

"I'm not. I wasn't! This might be hard for you to believe, but my body's got a mind of its own."

Wang Xiaomie's face reddened. He wanted to cry but found no tears. You really couldn't judge a book by its cover. Wasn't this Yi Yan guy just a

little too uncouth? Who would've thought he'd make him do a thing like this!

Wen Fengjin wordlessly continued to hold him down.

A long while later, Boss Wen suddenly grunted, after which a blank-faced Wang Xiaomie felt a certain large member stand to attention with vigor.

He was flabbergasted. *Bro, as the male protag, aren't you supposed to have superhuman endurance?!*

Perhaps because of Wang Xiaomie's overly astonished expression, a rare hint of embarrassment showed itself on Wen Fengjin's sinisterly beautiful face.

He said, "The stuff Yi Yan had Bai Yu feed you must have taken effect. It's most likely a drug meant to control you. Seeing as it started acting up today, those six doses must have been all of it."

Wang Xiaomie fell silent for a moment before lifting his head with a question. "Are you…changing the subject?"

Wen Fengjin fell silent and lightly shot him a glance. That look sent a shiver down Wang Xiaomie's spine. "…Just because I saw through it doesn't mean I should've said it. I was wrong. Please continue."

Wen Fengjin pressed his lips together for a moment before saying, "This is no simple drug, if it still has this effect after we forcefully expelled so much of it through the blood ritual. His original intent must have been to erase your consciousness and fully turn you into a puppet. Aside from your body being controlled, do you sense anything else?"

"Nothing." His body was twisted into a pretzel, but his mind had not the faintest awareness of movement. It was a strange sensation, and kind of

amusing, too. Wang Xiaomie shook his head. “I still know who I am, and my memory’s not confused at all.”

“That’s good. Yi Yan must have taken into account the fact that I won’t hurt you, intending for you to deal me some kind of injury that wouldn’t immediately heal. After which, he’d take you away.”

“That more or less lines up with what you originally thought.” Wang Xiaomie frowned. “So what do we do now? If the drug is used to control my body, then there’s no use in us tricking him, right?”

Wen Fengjin looked at him. Being pinned by those abyss-like black eyes made Wang Xiaomie start feeling a little uneasy.

“Wh-what are you looking at me for?”

“Endure it.”

“Wha?”

Wen Fengjin suddenly broke into a smile, throwing Wang Xiaomie off guard for a moment—only for a powerful and familiar pain to burst through his mind a moment later.

“Fuuuuuuuuccckk!”

It’s the frickin’ blood ritual, owowouch!

Beneath the curve of the moon, a scream sounded throughout the entire villa. A few of their closer neighbors startled awake from their dreams, thought it over for a moment, then threw their blankets over their heads and went back to sleep. Everyone in this neighborhood had their own secrets. They knew better than to meddle with things that were none of their business.

Under the moonlight, a figure jumped out of the second floor of the house like some sort of werewolf, leaving the villa in a few quick leaps.

Being puppeteered had awakened Wang Xiaomie's body's potential, as if that already unaging, undying, infinite-strength-possessing shell had been unlocked with the twist of a key.

He could really leap across roofs like a wuxia fighter, his feet touching one streetlamp after the other as he continued to fly. Acrophobic Wang Xiaomie silently swept his gaze over the heights beneath his midair form.

I've left the warehouse, and I'm feeling fine.[7] *I've now successfully entered orbit. Over.*

A black crow glided over, fluttering and flapping its wings as it landed on Wang Xiaomie's shoulder and gave him a fright. Upon closer inspection, however, he discovered that this crow's eyes were red, flashing like glass marbles with an inorganic light. It was probably one of Yi Yan's puppets as well.

He wordlessly allowed the crow to follow him, ending his trip at Yi Yan's shop, as expected. His body stood at the doorway while the crow called out three times. Before long, the door was pushed open to reveal mature and gentle Yi Yan in his pale green magua, smiling as he opened his arms to pull him into a hug.

"Welcome back, my greatest masterpiece."

He was all smiles. Behind him stood an expressionless Bai Yu.

Yi Yan took Wang Xiaomie's hand and led him inside. Wang Xiaomie adopted a dull-eyed look, like he was still being controlled, as he obediently followed him in.

The door was shut tight.

Many large boxes were placed around the parlor. By the looks of things, Yi Yan was preparing to kidnap him and immediately switch locations. Upon entering the lamplit hall, the older man somewhat absentmindedly placed a hand against the dead-eyed Wang Xiaomie's cheek, gently stroking it.

"So beautiful." Yi Yan sighed with great feeling. He looked like he'd sunk into a great sea of emotion. "You are the most beautiful work I've done in this lifetime…"

He kept caressing his cheek, again and again. He even brushed a thumb back and forth over Wang Xiaomie's lips, staining it with the blood Wen Fengjin had fed him after initiating their blood ritual.

"Since he didn't follow you, I'll take that to mean you successfully injured him."

That distinctive face with its modest good looks drew closer, until there was but a finger's span between his and Wang Xiaomie's faces. Yi Yan laughed and lowered his head to wipe the bloodstains from Wang Xiaomie's mouth. "What a good boy."

Fuck! You're a pervert! Wang Xiaomie, still playing the fool, felt goosebumps rise all over his skin.

Just when he was about to reach his limit and bite that overly flirtatious claw, Bai Yu spoke up. He said, "Laoshi."

That note of warning made Yi Yan freeze up for a moment, after which he released Wang Xiaomie with a quirk of his lips. Wang Xiaomie breathed a sigh of relief, watching as Yi Yan turned to say something to Bai Yu in a low voice. The quiet little girl, Xiao-An, sat swinging her legs atop a suitcase, dressed in a pale purple vest and skirt with a white lace shirt.

The quiet conversation ended quickly. Bai Yu looked extremely unhappy, and so did Yi Yan. The two of them looked at each other for a few minutes, after which Yi Yan changed the topic by saying, "We need to leave quickly in order to avoid direct confrontation with Wen Fengjin. I'll leave a letter in the hall, directing Wen Fengjin to chase us into our trap. Bai Yu… we can discuss those things later. You and Xiao-An put your things in the car, and I'll be out in a bit with Xiaomie, all right?"

His voice was warm and placating, and he lifted a hand to pat Bai Yu's head. Bai Yu looked over at the dull-eyed Wang Xiaomie, then walked over to Xiao-An without another word, saying, "Let's go."

"Okay." Xiao-An jumped down, easily lifting two big boxes. Bai Yu picked up the rest, then walked over to Wang Xiaomie's side, using his free hand to lead him outside.

In the moment he turned his head, Wang Xiaomie caught a glimpse of Yi Yan placing a letter on the tea table before turning with a quiet laugh and following them.

The shop wasn’t locked, probably to make it easier for Wen Fengjin to pursue them.

The luggage was tossed into the trunk. Xiao-An smartly pulled open the door to the front passenger seat and climbed in, and Bai Yu moved Wang Xiaomie into the car before sitting next to him.

As he looked at the lifeless eyes of the person who’d once taken such care of him, Bai Yu suddenly spoke up, giving Wang Xiaomie a fright.

He said, “I don’t regret it. Xiaomie, I’m sorry. I’m not a good person anymore. I might have done the worst thing I could possibly do in this lifetime by betraying you… You and Boss Wen were so good to me… But I don’t regret it. All people are selfish and capable of change… If I die at Boss Wen’s hands one day, I can consider myself freed from this.”

After saying this, Bai Yu started to straighten out Wang Xiaomie’s messed-up clothes. Wang Xiaomie was nervous. When he left, Wen Fengjin had tied the knife Kaiming to the inside of his thigh, beneath his loose-fit leisurewear. Fortunately, after doing some slight rearranging, Bai Yu noticed he wasn’t wearing shoes, frowned, and started patting a towel against the bottoms of his feet. He’d been sleeping when all this first occurred, so it was a blessing he was wearing clothes at all. His slippers had long disappeared somewhere while he was running.

The car door opened and then closed with a *bang*. The inside of the car shook a few times. Seeing Yi Yan climb in, Bai Yu stopped speaking.

The spacious Land Rover started up. They left the tiny city that same night, heading at full speed to some specific destination.

Not long after, an entirely uninjured silver-haired man, dressed all in black, stood in the deserted shop, opened the thick letter, and laughed. His

lowered gaze was hidden in shadow. Though he hadn’t said or done anything, he looked terrifying and twisted. He looked almost like a corpse-dismembering homicidal maniac blocking the only exit of a dark alleyway.

“Yi Yan.” Wen Fengjin lowered his head, his low, hoarse laughter gradually growing louder. “Wait for me—”

He looked up, a cold, bloodthirsty light flashing through his pitch-black eyes.

“If you wish for death, I’ll make certain to grant it!”

Chapter 75:
A Truth like Lightning

THE CAR SPED ALL THE WAY down the freeway, not stopping for anything except to replenish snacks and water, or take care of bodily needs. Wang Xiaomie had to hold it for the entire trip, even if he needed to use the restroom. After all, he was supposed to be an obedient puppet right now. Who knew if he was supposed to be able to talk? It'd be real bad if he accidentally exposed himself.

Luckily, Yi Yan didn't neglect him, and had Bai Yu help Wang Xiaomie take care of business when they reached a rest stop.

Their little group was extremely attention-grabbing. Wang Xiaomie had gentle, delicate features, a head of long black hair, despite being a man, and wore a lifeless expression to top it all off. And Yi Yan looked like he'd just got off work acting in a historical play.

Yi Yan's response to anyone curious was to smile and explain with total calm, "This is my little brother. He was born with mental issues."

Wang Xiaomie silently fumed. You're *the one with mental issues! Your whole family was born with mental issues!*

The gawkers awkwardly turned their gazes away.

Having easily dealt with suspicious passersby, they got Wang Xiaomie back into the car. After who knew how many more rest stops, the car finally got off the freeway. The scenery they passed gradually became more of a wasteland, and the car started to bounce and slow down. Wang Xiaomie snuck a few looks outside, and realized their current location

appeared to be a barren mountain. The roads were made of dirt and covered in rocks. The cut-down weeds and leaves on either side were still young and tender, signifying that this road had only just recently been opened up.

The car violently bounced down the path for another half hour, dry sediment flying all over the place. The white vehicle was soon covered in dust as it rocked and swayed its way past a stone tablet. The tablet should have had the name of the surrounding village or area written on it, but this one was entirely blank. It looked new, and seemed like it'd just been pulled from the quarry.

Once they arrived at the village, the car stopped. Bai Yu tugged Wang Xiaomie out to follow behind Yi Yan and Xiao-An.

There was no spirit in those black eyes, but a hint of brightness flashed through them when nobody else was looking. Wang Xiaomie quickly swept his gaze once over the structure of the village. The houses were all scattered and built at random, lacking any sense of community. They were all wooden two-story buildings.

The four of them strutted right into the deepest part of the village, making quite a ruckus, but not a single person came out to look. Their doors stayed shut tight and their windows stayed closed.

A barren mountain, a new road, an empty village… Er, this place doesn't have ghosts in it, does it?

Wang Xiao-Zongzi felt a chill down his back. He might have been a jiangshi, but he was a pseudo one! Nobody could say he wasn't afraid of ghosts, okay?!

He tearfully thought to himself, *It's been two days since I left my wild man at home. I miss him, sob.*

Yi Yan walked over to the entrance of a small wooden building, pulled out a key and opened the door. He turned, smiling, and said to Bai Yu, “We’ll live separately, and keep watch separately.”

He held the other key out toward Bai Yu, tilting his head to get Bai Yu to look at the two-story building next to him. “Xiaomie and I will stay in this one. His puppet strings require timely refinement. Nonhumans will be coming here in a few days to move into Mount Qi with me, so when that happens, I’ll leave this place to you.”

“Are you avoiding me?” Bai Yu looked at the key in Yi Yan’s hand, then lifted his head, a calm expression on his face. “Why? Is it because I’m no longer useful to you?”

Wang Xiaomie’s mouth twitched as he stood behind them. …*Da-Bai, you sure are being direct with your questions!*

Faced with such blunt interrogation, a normal person would show a hint of their true feelings, regardless of whether they felt guilty or not. Yi Yan’s smile didn’t change in the slightest.

He said, “Whether you believe me or not, I’ll never hurt you, and I certainly won’t judge you by your usefulness. You are someone close to me, and always will be.”

Bai Yu lowered his head in silence.

Yi Yan, meanwhile, took hold of Wang Xiaomie (who was still playing dumb) and pulled him along into the house. The wooden door was shut fast, cutting off the prying eyes of outsiders. Bai Yu slowly curled his hands into fists as he exhaled. A moment later, he quickly turned, a frosty expression on his face, and took Xiao-An and their luggage over to the building next door.

Yi Yan led Wang Xiaomie by the hand as he walked over to the stairs. His hands weren't icy-cold or slender, the way Wen Fengjin's were. They were pretty, but the palms were covered in hard scars, and made Wang Xiaomie want to pull away despite their being warm and dry.

As he looked back to see if Wang Xiaomie would fall over, he quietly said, "Watch your step on the stairs."

His voice was quiet and soft, his features as gentle and loving as the sensation of dipping your hand in calm water. He seemed to be treating Wang Xiaomie with the same care that you would an inordinately valuable and easily broken vase, or your most doted-on, clumsy youngest daughter.

Wang Xiaomie kept up his vacant pretense while inwardly feeling nothing but disgust.

He never could bring himself to like Yi Yan as a person. Even if the man was gentle and kind on the surface, like a caring teacher or elder, he was exactly the sort of person who, once he decided on his path, would stick to that path by fair means or foul, even rejecting all other paths in the process.

People who had no wants or desires inevitably lacked in their relationships. The more someone held themselves aloof from worldly affairs like Yi Yan did, the more terrifying that person became.

Just like the legendary weapon Kaiming. Wang Xiaomie's dagger, Kaiming, could sense any evil or murderous intent people had toward its wielder, and could also heat up in warning against certain reprehensible figures. But even though he was standing this close to Yi Yan, Kaiming hadn't grown the slightest bit hotter.

What did this mean? It meant that even if Yi Yan had poisoned him to overtake his mind and turn him into a puppet, in Yi Yan's heart, he believed that he was doing all this for Wang Xiaomie's own good. It wasn't evil, it was good! Even if his hands were coated in the blood of nonhumans, it was all to protect humanity, and so that, too, was good!

Such a person…was beyond scary…

An increasingly terrified Wang Xiaomie was led upstairs, where Yi Yan put a dark blue cotton cloth on a chair, then had Wang Xiaomie sit on it.

Wang Xiaomie was wearing relatively loose, light gray long pants and a T-shirt. His eyes were wide and bright, his eyebrows slender, his lashes thick. Beneath his aquiline nose was a pair of full, pink lips, and the contours of his face contained no sharpness, giving him the impression of a proper young gentleman. At present, he was obediently sitting on a chair cushioned with a dark blue cloth, like an exorbitantly priced luxury good in a glass-fronted cabinet, costly and beautiful.

Yi Yan clearly thought of him that way as well. But he had far more feelings for Wang Xiaomie than that.

He went down on one knee before Wang Xiaomie, his narrow eyes sparkling as he reached out with both hands. Wang Xiaomie tried his hardest to prevent himself from shutting his eyes out of nervousness.

Those hands did nothing to him, but instead reached for the back of his head. There was a slight tug at his skull, and the rubber band holding his hair was pulled loose, causing long, ink-black hair to spill like a waterfall.

Yi Yan's lips quirked upward, and he took a strand of hair in his hand.

He suddenly said, “Once I finish growing and refining the puppet threads within your body, I’ll be able to possess you. I know what special properties you people have, heh heh. Unaging and undying, like humans yet not, like jiangshi yet not.”

Yi Yan lowered his gaze as his fingertips plucked at the black hair in his hand. “I must thank my previous customer Yan Chun for making it possible for me to make you, my masterpiece. Did I mention it was on an herb-gathering trip twenty years ago that I met Yan Chun? Twenty years ago… I was a leading figure in Artisan circles, with a mastery of tool-refinement and puppet crafting. And my power… I could hold my own in battle against a hanba, even without a puppet like Xiao-An.”

Wang Xiaomie’s face didn’t so much as twitch, but on the inside, he was dumbstruck. Yi Yan could actually fight the hanba An Xie barehanded?! Did this guy still count as human?!

As he thought this, he heard Yi Yan say, “The year I met Yan Chun, he saw that I had the ability to kill him, as well as the ability to save him. So he decided to make a deal with me…” He continued with a sneer, “A walking corpse who couldn’t even control the power within his own blood actually had the guts to speak to me like that! Heh. I pretended to accept his offer, then collected his blood over a long period of time for research. The feather pattern was actually just the first version of the puppet threads. That self-important monster, whose head was filled with nothing but thoughts of revenge, had not the slightest idea he’d long since fallen under my control. He was truly a fool! Afterward, hoping to obtain my assistance, he told me a story that took place a thousand years ago…”

Yi Yan’s face pressed closer, so close that his and Wang Xiaomie’s breaths mingled, his voice crystal clear as he said with a chuckle, “So Wen

Fengjin, Mian Deng, I already knew about your existence long before we met. Did neither of you ever stop to wonder, despite your burial location being a secret, and Yan Chun spending so many years after climbing out of the dirt as a living corpse searching for your tomb in vain… Did you ever wonder how he suddenly managed to find it? That's because I told him."

Yi Yan smiled, a hint of shiver-inducing insanity entering his friendly features.

This freak! Wang Xiaomie was both shocked and frightened, wanting nothing more than to shout out loud, to look for Wen Fengjin to save him. But all he could do was sit there on the chair like a wooden puppet.

"…After meeting Yan Chun and acquiring his blood I ran into the hanba while cleaning up all those filthy nonhumans on Mount Qi." At this point, Yi Yan's smile disappeared. He unconsciously muttered, as if lost in some memory, "The hanba and I fell into a life-and-death battle. I seriously injured him, and he seriously injured me… In my haste, I drank a vial of Yan Chun's blood… I knew his blood had properties that could snatch you back from the jaws of death, but I never imagined that I would become the way I am now." He released the ends of Wang Xiaomie's hair to rub at his own face instead. "Who could have believed time could rewind, restoring my body to its youth? I couldn't use my ID anymore. Who'd believe that a man in his forties, on his way to middle age, had become a foolish youth under the age of twenty? I couldn't return home, nor could I ever acknowledge my son and grandson again! Do you understand that pain?!"

Yi Yan's features gradually turned savage. He raised his voice at Wang Xiaomie. "I *am* Bai Cheng! It's me! But I was turned into a lone wanderer without any friends or relatives, watching from the sidelines as my son ran around in search of me! Watching as he died at the hands of a

nonhuman because of a single accident! Watching my daughter-in-law die of illness! Watching my grandson grow up alone and unloved! I couldn't even use the identity of a relative to step up and help them—I could only send them money in silence!

"My wife also died at the hands of a nonhuman. She was a good woman. I loved her to a degree that may even surpass the love an Artisan has for tool refinement…but that day, I brought home an infant corpse that had been refined into an imp, thinking in my kindness that I'd attempt to help its soul transcend…only for it to bewitch my wife and kill her! They all deserve to die! Nonhumans are undeserving of pity. They all must die!"

Yi Yan—or perhaps we should say Bai Cheng—was panting out in quick breaths, his eyes filled with bloodred hate and fury, his gentle features and disposition twisted into something terrifying to look at.

Wang Xiaomie was scared shitless. *What are you yelling so loud for?! Go shout at my little Wenzi if you're got the balls!* Close to breaking down in tears, he watched as Yi Yan finished venting all his anger at him, his panting slowly subsiding.

After a long while, his expression and breathing finally relaxed. "Did I scare you? I'm sorry." He squeezed out a smile, but in Wang Xiaomie's eyes, this was even more terrifying than a demon's smiling visage. "I won't lose my temper at you like this again." Yi Yan stretched out a hand to caress Wang Xiaomie's cheek.

"After I was injured in the hanba fight, and everything else that happened, I lost track of the hanba, as he'd moved somewhere else. However, I could not forget that he was responsible for the plight I'm in today, and so I swore that I would kill him!

“I began expending vast amounts of materials in order to create golden tools, then gave these anti-nonhuman tools to grave robbers, often going down into underground tombs with them. They were greedy for money, while my goal was a simple one: I was looking for the hanba! And I could even clean up all the jiangshi in those tombs while I was at it.

“I searched for a long time. I went to your mausoleum as well; it was I who entered your palace and found the record on that tablet, which was also when I realized that your legend was quite similar to what Yan Chun told me. Not knowing your abilities, I retreated out of caution, and decided to sell the information to Yan Chun, so that idiot could scout things out for me.”

After hearing all this, Wang Xiaomie loudly yelled in his mind, *What the fuck!* He’d always wondered how Yan Chun managed to find them, and how he’d had a map of the mausoleum. *So it was you, you damn bastard!*

Chapter 76:
Explosion

AFTER BUSTING OUT THE NEWS that he was sixty-seven-year-old Uncle Bai, Yi Yan suddenly seemed to become a chatterbox, continually prattling on at Wang Xiao-Puppet.

Mister, are you a princess who likes talking to her Barbie dolls? Speaking of which, an uncle who can dress up his own puppet as Pretty Soldier Sailor Moon… Wang Xiaomie's mouth twitched as he thought, *You definitely keep up with the trends, ol' sir.*

"When Yan Chun and Zhen Bei didn't return, I knew they'd failed. But that doesn't matter—I still have many other customers aside from them."

Yi Yan stood up to place a suitcase on the table, opening it to reveal not clothes, but a bunch of things Wang Xiaomie didn't recognize.

"I actually had no plans to do anything to the two of you, at first. Though you've lived a long time, as far as I'm concerned, you still fall within the realm of humanity, and I never take human lives."

He smiled, and Wang Xiaomie felt the rising urge to throw a Humane Fist at his face! *It's true that you don't take lives! But what you're doing is even more despicable!*

Unable to hear Wang Xiaomie's internal tirade, Yi Yan continued, "The first one to learn that you'd come to the surface was actually one of my puppets. I left a puppet at Bai Yu's side. He's quite a talented boy. To be honest, I didn't want to let him into the Artisan life, but he kept doing

research on his own, so I had no choice but to protect him this way. I never thought he'd happen to pick a fight with you, and even form a bond of fate with you… And then later on, you saved him from the hands of that nonhuman, and took him in… At the time, I thought this might be an opportunity."

Yi Yan kept speaking softly as he busied himself with setting out the items in the suitcase. "The crazed woman and the puppet that you met at Bai Yu's home later were both my doing. Taking care of the nonhuman who showed up at your house was also an excuse for me to approach you."

He suddenly tilted his head to shoot a smile at Wang Xiaomie, who was still stuck unmoving in his chair. "Your body truly is the most beautiful work of art on this Earth. It's practically perfect for making into a puppet."

Wang Xiaomie gritted his teeth. *That melon atop your neck is looking incredibly ripe. How about you let me twist it off for you?!*

No wonder that girl had nearly hacked him to death like Makoto-ge at Bai Yu's place, and no wonder Yi Yan suddenly showed up when they were attacked by another jiangshi afterward. It was all part of his plan.

But Wen Fengjin had already discovered that a long time ago, saying that he'd seen a note in the margins of one of those old books Bai Yu brought over. It had said, *Met a nonhuman with the surname of Yan, acquired its blood.* There was also the flag in Yi Yan's doorway, which had "Bai" written on it in the Artisans' special code.

Yi Yan/Bai Cheng probably didn't expect anyone to be able to recognize Artisan script, but after Wang Xiaomie's death, Wen Fengjin had recruited talented people from across the county with all sorts of unusual abilities in his quest to bring him back to life. Artisans and Daoist priests

had numbered among them, and Wen Fengjin had done some research on their script.

But even so, Wen Fengjin had only guessed that Bai Yu and Yi Yan were relatives, possibly father and son. When he told Wang Xiaomie his theory, Wang Xiaomie was so shocked that his jaw nearly hit the floor. Then, upon hearing from Bai Yu that he'd actually fallen in love with Yi Yan, all that remained in Wang Xiaomie's heart was a row of ellipses…

And now Yi Yan was saying he was Bai Cheng, Bai Yu's grandfather…

…The heck do you mean, his grandpa! What dang turn of events is this?! A frickin' father-son romance was shocking enough, and now you're telling me it's a damn grandpa-grandson romance?

Grandpa-grandson romance!

Realizing this was probably Bai Yu's first love, Wang Xiaomie…was still somewhat bitterly disappointed that Da-Bai would betray him, but there was now also an inexplicable pang of sympathy.

The death of these feelings is truly tragic, amen. I pray that heaven has no Ol' Bai…

Three seconds after paying silent tribute, Wang Xiaomie's thoughts suddenly froze up. *That's right!* It made sense for Bai Yu to misunderstand why Yi Yan was so nice to him. After all, Yi Yan was Bai Yu's grandfather, and there was nothing strange about a grandpa doting on his grandson. That he didn't understand Bai Yu's feelings at first was very likely because, in his old age, he straight-up hadn't considered such an off-the-wall possibility.

But what about after that? If he hadn’t noticed over ten or twenty days, then what about over one or two months? Bai Yu so obviously wanted to be on intimate terms with him; could so shrewd a guy as Yi Yan really not see it? Recalling what Yi Yan had told Bai Yu earlier when saying they’d live separately, Wang Xiaomie felt certain he’d noticed.

What a tragedy!

He’d personally turned his only heir gay and even ended his own family line—if it weren’t for the fact he couldn’t talk, Wang Xiaomie would have loved to do a quick interview with Yi Yan about how he was feeling right now.

Are you getting a real kick out of it? Ahem, I’m not gloating over this disaster or anything. Wang Xiaomie quietly hid a laugh. *I’m really not, heh heh…*

As Yi Yan simply sorted his puppet-making materials into the room’s wooden cupboard, an unlocked red lacquer box attracted Wang Xiaomie’s attention.

When Yi Yan opened it to check its contents, Wang Xiaomie was fortunate enough to get a few glimpses as well. Inside it was a fully poseable little wooden puppet wrapped entirely in transparent thread, the sight of which caused Wang Xiaomie’s eyes to light up. He guessed this was what was controlling him.

The wooden box was quickly closed again, and Yi Yan locked the cupboard after putting it inside.

“I still need to use this to manipulate you into making Wen Fengjin fight the hanba for me.”

Yi Yan quirked his lips, his narrow eyes making him look like a fox.

“In a few days, I’ll be entering Mount Qi with a few grave robbers to steal the other jiangshi that hanba treasures so dearly. What do you think? If I use both you and that jiangshi to threaten the hanba and Wen Fengjin into fighting each other, maybe I can make it so whichever of them wins decides which of you survives? Heh heh.”

Fuck that’s evil, Uncle! Wang Xiaomie thought. If it came down to Wen Fengjin fighting for his survival, and An Xie fighting for his purple-furred creature to survive, they’d definitely turn it into a fight to the death. Neither of them was an easy opponent, so whoever was left would definitely be heavily injured afterward. Wouldn’t that leave Yi Yan free to end things however he wanted?

Wang Xiaomie gritted his teeth in silence as Yi Yan walked over to pet his head the way one would a dog.

“Good boy~”

Good boy, my ass!

They suddenly heard someone calling from downstairs. Yi Yan said, “It looks like they’ve arrived.”

These would be the grave robbers he’d hired. He glanced at the quartz clock on the wall and said, “It should take at least four days for Wen Fengjin to catch up. That’s more than enough time.”

Having said this, Yi Yan cheerfully headed downstairs, certain that Wang Xiaomie would be unable to escape.

And Wang Xiaomie indeed wasn’t able to make unnecessary movements, his only option being to sit there obediently and not move a muscle.

…Wouldn’t his thighs go numb after sitting here for an hour? *Puppets have no human rights,* Wang Xiaomie tearfully thought.

What was Yi Yan saying to those people? The wooden building didn’t have very good sound insulation, and Wang Xiaomie had sharp ears. He could tell that there was a huge number of grave robbers out there, probably a few dozen, judging by the ruckus they were making. A few men among them had particularly loud voices, and Wang Xiaomie picked up that Yi Yan had given each of them a golden tool…

Wow! One for each of them… An Xie and Lil’ Purple Fur are really beyond doomed.

Time was of the essence, and Yi Yan’s calculations were on the mark, deciding when to set out based on when Wen Fengjin would arrive. That night, he came upstairs and puppeteered Wang Xiaomie to take care of his physical needs, then had him sit back down in the chair again.

The raucous noise of the group outside grew distant, and Wang Xiaomie didn’t see Yi Yan again.

Yi Yan was gone, and after Wen Fengjin’s last blood ritual, Wang Xiaomie was able to move his fingers and body to a small extent. However, he continued to hold still, just in case there were monitors or something similar in the room.

The next morning, it was Bai Yu who came upstairs, carrying a suitcase. After sitting still for an entire night, Wang Xiaomie felt like he definitely had a vertebral herniation, periarthritis, and cervical spondylosis.

Bai Yu opened the cabinet with a small key and pulled out the wooden box, then picked up the wooden puppet to maneuver Wang

Xiaomie into standing up. The instant he did so, Wang Xiaomie could clearly hear all the joints in his body let out piteous, crackling wails.

It was a good thing he couldn't really feel anything from the neck down right now, or else how sore would he be?

Bai Yu wasn't as adept as Yi Yan at this. He manipulated Wang Xiaomie into a bunch of different contorted positions before finally settling down. After using the restroom and washing his face, Wang Xiaomie was once more helped back onto the chair.

…You really are family after all! Can't you guys let me lie down for a bit?! I'd even be okay with standing for a while!

Sadly, Bai Yu didn't hear Wang Xiaomie's inner voice. He squatted down on the floor to sort out the contents of the suitcase, which were a collection of magua in light green or pale blue, and some personal effects. No wonder Wang Xiaomie didn't see any toiletries in Yi Yan's suitcase yesterday—all his things were in this one instead.

Furtively watching Bai Yu's serious profile as he put away Yi Yan's clothes, Wang Xiaomie mentally heaved a sigh. *Do you really like him that much, Da-Bai?* Abandoning his friends, sensing the other man distancing himself from him, and still feeling honor-bound to keep tagging along…

In the eyes of Wang Xiaomie, who had two lifetimes' worth of romance (hell) experience, Bai Yu's original feelings had undoubtedly been strong and pure before Yi Yan led him onto a crooked path. And now, a lot of other things were mixed up with those feelings too, like the pain of having the person he liked distance himself from him, and the stubborn urge to hang onto his original feelings. If he really had deeply loved him before,

then letting go was certain to be difficult. If breaking up was that easy, then there wouldn't be so many pining lovers throughout history.

He could understand all this, but…Wang Xiaomie wanted to face-palm.

Da-Bai, Yi Yan's your grandpa! Your very own grandpa!

He could barely bring himself to wonder how Bai Yu would react to learning this. He took a moment to imagine the conversation that would occur when they cleared the air in the future. Something like:

Da-Bai: Yi Yan, I like you! Let's get together!

Yi Yan: We can't.

Da-Bai: Why not?

Yi Yan: Because I'm your grandpa, son.

Da-Bai: …

After imagining this, Wang Xiaomie thought, *This is too much. It's seriously too much. It's such a bombshell that I'm about ready to shed bittersweet tears for Lao-Bai and Da-Bai's love story.*

Just as he was thinking this, something suddenly made a *ding* noise.

Wang Xiaomie quietly looked over to find that a pocket watch had fallen out of an interior pocket of the outfit Bai Yu just picked up. The round silver watch spun in a few circles before lying still on the ground.

Bai Yu froze up for a moment before picking up the pocket watch. Its surface was worn smooth, like it was often held and played with. It was definitely an object that constantly accompanied its owner. Between how time-worn it looked, and the fact that it fell out of Yi Yan's pocket, there

was definitely no questioning whom it belonged to. He'd probably left it in that inner pocket by accident when changing his clothes.

As Bai Yu brushed over the surface of the pocket watch, a weak smile appeared on his face. He opened it up to find watch hands that were no longer moving, and a round photo stuck to the inside of the lid.

A man's pocket watch was relatively large, so the photo was one of two people pressed close together. The photo was very blurry by now. You could only just make out that it was a picture of Yi Yan and a woman. In the black-and-white photo, the woman was somewhat darker than the man beside her, with round eyes and a small, elegant nose, her mouth carrying a natural upward curve, her lips full, her face filled with boundless energy. Aside from looking extremely attractive, you could also tell at a glance that she was the witty, cute type.

Upon closer inspection, Wang Xiaomie realized that the woman actually looked kind of similar to Bai Yu.

And after he looked it over for a moment, Bai Yu's smile suddenly froze on his face. His expression changed to one of disbelief as he flipped the photo back and forth.

The part of this pocket watch where the photo was placed was clearly specially designed for it. You could even lift the tiny, round frame to reveal the back of the photo, upon which were written a few tiny words.

"For my wife."

Bai Yu was entirely silent.

Wang Xiaomie thought, *Oho, it's over now.*

"How is this possible?!" Bai Yu muttered to himself, then seemed to think of something and quickly bolted out the door.

A few minutes later, Wang Xiaomie heard him charge back up the stairs again, carrying a creased photo in his hand. He placed this photo on the floor, then placed the pocket watch down right next to it.

A witty smile, cute and elegant features… The woman in the photo and the one in the pocket watch were clearly the same person!

“Grandma…”

Bai Yu fell to his knees, the light gone from his eyes. “How is this possible… How is this possible?!”

Chapter 77:
So You're Here, Bro?

AND ANOTHER ONE loses his mind.

Wang Xiaomie heaved a deep sigh as he watched Bai Yu go from shock to disbelief to muttering conjectures to himself, and then finally to howling like a madman.

As a puppet they thought had no self-awareness or ability to speak, he'd become the perfect captive audience.

Tears spilled down Bai Yu's cheeks as he gripped the photo and pocket watch tightly to his chest and kneeled next to Wang Xiaomie's chair, looking like he was struggling to breathe.

Looking at his suffering form, Wang Xiaomie silently sighed in sympathy. Your husband becoming your own grandfather in the blink of an eye, and your romantic rival being your grandmother… No one could take this in stride.

Bai Yu cried for a while before taking Wang Xiaomie's hand and letting out a heartrending roar. "Why! *Why!* It can't happen! There's no way —*aaah*!"

Wang Xiaomie was flabbergasted. *My…my hand hurts!*

Bai Yu was breaking down in tears. His next shout seemed to come from his very soul. "You're actually my grandpa—who would've thought you'd be my *grandpa*?! Why didn't you tell me? *Why couldn't you have told me?!*"

Wang Xiaomie thought, *Tragic, this is beyond tragic.*

“I treated him as my most beloved, but he thought of me only as a grandson!”

Wang Xiaomie stayed silent. *We puppets are professionally trained. We won’t laugh, no matter how funny it is. Unless—*

“I can’t believe I have to call him Grandpa…” True Grandson Bai Yu started crying even more sadly than before.

“Pfft!”

Bai Yu was startled by this sound. He hurriedly turned his head to see that Wang Xiaomie still had lifeless eyes and a dull look on his face, staring at who-knew-what as he sat on that chair. Could he have imagined it?

Bai Yu furrowed his brow before lowering his head and resuming his sorrowful sobbing, thus failing to see that just the moment his head went down, Wang Xiaomie’s face immediately twisted, trying so hard not to laugh that his cheeks were cramping.

“He took me as a disciple and taught me the Artisan craft without any reservations, and provided me with all the necessities, thoughtfully giving me hot milk every day, even washing my clothes for me, taking me to the amusement park and the movie theater… Now he’s become more and more distant with me. And those words he said before…”

No wonder…no wonder! Yi Yan knew all along, but was hiding it from him all this time…

Bai Yu was crying so hard his entire body shook, thinking to himself that it was no wonder Yi Yan treated him so kindly. It was he who’d misunderstood from the start. The man had never had any such intentions toward him. He’d always been doting on him the way you would a younger

relative, and only started distancing himself when he discovered Bai Yu's feelings…

He felt humiliated. He felt an indescribable sense of shame, anger, and pain. It was as if someone was whispering scattered words of mockery into his ears. *How absurd. To think he fell in love with his own elder.*

This fabricated voice seemed to fill Bai Yu's ears with its demonic words, causing hatred to well up within him. But then he found himself perplexed.

Who was he supposed to hate? Yi Yan? But the man only doted on him as a grandson, never realizing Bai Yu had such feelings for him. Xiaomie and his husband? But what did any of this have to do with them? Nobody was in the wrong, nobody at all… So where exactly did things go wrong?

A dazed look crossed Bai Yu's tear-streaked face as he kneeled there on the floor. "I helped him poison Xiaomie without a second thought, I betrayed my friends, and this is how it all turned out in the end? I just want a home… I just want to spend my life with the person I like, to have a complete family…"

Bai Yu suddenly started laughing, louder and louder. With his puffy red eyes and the dull look on his face, he looked like he'd gone insane.

Wang Xiaomie could no longer laugh at this sight, mentally shaking his head. They said fate made fools of us all, turning coincidence into calamity. The TV dramas and novels he used to consume often had scenes like this, where the person a character liked turned out to be related to them by blood or something similar. He'd laughed at the absurdity of filming or writing such a thing in this day and age, thinking it was all a bunch of

nonsense—and now? He'd just watched one of these scenes play out before his very eyes.

In the eyes of an outsider like Wang Xiaomie, this entire thing should honestly be blamed on Yi Yan.

What were you trying to hide here? It was one thing to stay silent at the start, but after taking him in as a disciple, you should have just come clean. What were you keeping your mouth shut for?! And now look, your grandson's turned gay. Wang Xiaomie sighed. *What do you even say about a thing like this?!*

Bai Yu sat there crying and laughing like a madman for half the day. After a few hours, he staggered to his feet, a blank look on his face, legs probably asleep from sitting so long, and limped his way slowly out the door without giving Wang Xiaomie a single backward glance.

After he left, Wang Xiaomie blinked with a sigh of relief, finally free from having to keep up the act. He looked over at the stairs, still somewhat worried about Bai Yu.

In all honesty, he really was quite disappointed in him, and angry as well, but not enough to be able to say he hated his guts. Seeing how Bai Yu was right now, Wang Xiaomie not only felt a little sympathetic, but was also afraid he might be unable to get over it and do something regrettably foolish. After all, as careless and silly as Bai Yu appeared to be, he actually had quite a one-track mind, and you could tell at a glance that he was an expert at fixating on things to an unnecessary degree.

A full day passed.

The next day, Bai Yu's eyelids were so red and puffy they looked like bubbles. His normally round eyes had shrunk to slits, and below them were

the darkest possible bags. It was impossible to miss that he'd spent the whole night crying.

But there was a sinister look on his face now. He'd lost that silly, toothily grinning, adorable look he used to have. It was like he'd become another person entirely. After coming upstairs and maneuvering Puppet Wang Xiaomie into dealing with his physical needs, he turned and silently left again.

This version of Bai Yu was honestly terrifying, and he couldn't help wondering: When Yi Yan came back, would Bai Yu get into a fight with him?

After another day and a half, Yi Yan returned.

Thumping noises sounded out within the wooden two-story building, and Bai Yu came up, maneuvering Wang Xiaomie to walk down the stairs without bothering to say a word. Upon reaching the lower floor, Wang Xiaomie found Yi Yan drinking tea in a wooden chair. His clothes were dirty, and a big white sack sat next to him.

There was an indescribably unpleasant smell wafting from his body, like a mixture of blood, mud, rust, and a bunch of other smells. There was even a hint of a bitter aroma in there.

Plus…

Wang Xiaomie cast a lightning-quick glance around the living room and the area outside the opened front door. Not a single car was missing.

There wasn't anyone else around. Not a single one of those twenty-plus grave robbers had come back, only Yi Yan…

Wang Xiaomie felt his insides turn cold.

Even more astonishing was the fact that Bai Yu was standing by Yi Yan's side, just as before. Though they weren't acting particularly close, there was no indication that they'd fought or argued, either.

Did this mean Bai Yu hadn't told Yi Yan that he'd discovered the truth? Why? Wang Xiaomie couldn't understand it.

"Has anything happened while I was gone these past few days?"

Though his tone was gentle, Yi Yan sounded noticeably exhausted as he turned his head to ask Bai Yu this question.

Bai Yu shook his head. "Nothing at all."

Yi Yan nodded at that, saying, "I'm tired, due to some slight injuries I received. Have Xiao-An pick a room to shut these things into. Once I've dealt with my wounds we can prepare to receive our guests."

Bai Yu replied, "Okay." Yi Yan put down his tea, got up, and went upstairs. A cold-faced Bai Yu went out and called Xiao-An over, then took control of Wang Xiaomie while Xiao-An lifted the big white sack. They found a nearby room to carelessly shove the sack and Wang Xiaomie into before leaving again. The wooden door shut tight with a noticeable creak. They even locked it from outside.

Wang Xiaomie perked up, waiting until he could no longer hear footsteps outside before blinking. Those dull, lifeless eyes brightened in an instant, seeming to contain a starry sky within them.

He quietly called out to the big sack on the ground, "Hey, you okay? Are you still alive?"

The sack wriggled slightly and a withered hand covered in stiff, purple hair reached from its deliberately loosened opening.

Just as he thought… An Xie's little emperor had been captured.

Wang Xiaomie whispered with a smile, "Welcome to the party, brother."

The purple-furred hand froze for a moment, then vigorously waved a few times. The sack began to shake, but would not open enough to let anything but the one hand through. It was a mystery what it was made of, for the little purple furball scratched at it for a good while without any results at all.

"Graaaah—"

The purple furball inside roared in impatience and anxiety, and Wang Xiaomie, worried that his behavior would attract attention, hurriedly tried to placate him. "It's okay, don't be scared! An Xie and Wen Fengjin will definitely come to find us. That guy won't hurt us for now, so just hold on!"

Purple-Fur's struggling weakened slightly. "Graaah—"

It let out another low howl, then began making weird noises, as if trying to speak to Wang Xiaomie.

Wang Xiaomie sighted, "Bro, I know I might look like a fellow zongzi, but I honestly don't understand jiangshi-speak. Anyway, my point is, don't worry. We'll definitely get out of here."

"Grah…"

Purple-Fur sounded disappointed. The sack stopped moving as well, making for a pretty pathetic-looking sight.

With no one around to see, Wang Xiaomie dropped his act too. He inched his way over with great effort to sit himself down next to Purple-Fur, then patted his shoulder in consolation.

As he gazed at the sliver of light leaking through the little wooden door, he was overcome with a sudden feeling of desolation. “Iron gate and iron window, iron chains as well… Weehhh, Xiao-Wenzi, where are you…? Sigh.”

***

After picking up the thick letter in Yi Yan’s house that day, Wen Fengjin only glanced over it once before tossing it. All it contained was a mess of random clues, pointing him toward Mount Qi.

Wen Fengjin, having already foreseen all this, dashed off to An Xie’s tomb chamber. So, though Yi Yan had assumed he’d take at least four days to arrive, he reached the destination in only three. And he didn’t immediately look for Wang Xiaomie, but headed for An Xie’s underground chamber, instead.

The moss-covered tomb passages were littered with the chaotic vestiges of activated traps and hidden weapons, as well as some equipment left behind by grave robbers. Though this mausoleum wasn’t nearly as enormous and splendid as Wen Fengjin’s, it was still the shared grave of a general and an emperor. It covered a sizeable area, and was fairly complicated in its design.

Gold-threaded black boots strode over the corpses and puddles of blood on the ground, red-and-black robes swishing in a leisurely arc. When Wen Fengjin caught sight of An Xie leaning against his casket on his knees, the long spear in his hand propped against the ground, surrounded by dead jiangshi, soldiers, and grave robbers, he quirked his pink lips in a smile.

He stopped, then indifferently said to An Xie, who was kneeling with lowered head and closed eyes, “Are you dead?”

An Xie, covered in blood and with battle scars all over his armor, lifted his youthful head to reveal a smile as clear and bright as ever. “Nope,” he said, “I’m still breathing, more or less.”

There was a clink of golden armor as An Xie used his spear to push himself to his feet, then stretched. The eyes beneath that smiling face were as cold as wintry frost. “My little emperor’s been taken hostage.”

Wen Fengjin hummed in agreement. “My shixiong, too.”

The two wifeless men shared a look, then both laughed.

“Everything’s going as planned?”

“Mn.”

“That’s good… This time, I’ll definitely kill him and halt any future trouble for all eternity. Otherwise, won’t we have given away our wives and lost our soldiers on top of it?”[8]

An Xie’s voice lowered slightly. He hugged his spear as he leaned back against the casket and turned his head to look at the man beside him. He raised his eyebrows at Wen Fengjin’s lack of reply. “Aren’t you anxious at all? You’re so calm.”

“Of course I’m anxious.”

Wen Fengjin leaned against the casket as well. His expression turned cold. His slender eyes hid sharp edges within them, and the bloodred pattern on his forehead became increasingly brighter. He said, “It’s already been nearly four days since Shixiong left me…”

“Tch, calm down. Don’t flare up at me—I’ve still got a hole in my stomach that’s not finished healing.” An Xie rubbed his chin. “When do we head out?”

Wen Fengjin tilted his head. “Tomorrow.”

“Got it!”

Chapter 78:
The Old, Frail, Sick, and Disabled

WANG XIAOMIE had a dream.

In the dream, he'd returned to that time a thousand years ago, when he was first chosen by the system for transmigration.

The system loudly shouted, "While the villain's still small, give him your all!"

It insisted on forcing Wang Xiaomie to reform the Big Boss villain with his love, becoming his unobtainable crush and his unforgettable love, and to nurture this number one villain in all areas of education and morals. In the event of his failure, it would put Wang Xiaomie to death, then kill the villain.

He watched as his dream-self resigned himself to his fate and worked as hard as he could, going through all the trials of parenthood to feed—ahem, to *raise* Wen Fengjin from a young wolf cub into an elegant young man.

As Wang Xiaomie was feeling proud of himself, a gust of wind suddenly blew past him. He closed his eyes, and when he opened them again he discovered that Wen Fengjin was still as handsome as ever, but now had a pair of gray wolf ears atop his head and a wagging wolf tail drooping from his butt. Meanwhile, he himself had a pair of tiny goat horns curling over either side of his head, looking like a pair of goat-horn croissants had been glued to his scalp.

As Wang Xiaomie stared dumbstruck at Wen Fengjin, he felt a strange sensation on his butt, followed by a sense of foreboding. He quickly turned to look, and found a little snow-white tail on his butt.

The little tail wagged, as if to say: *Bling bling~ Are you baamazed, hee hee!*

Wang Xiaomie was stupefied.

When he turned around again, the academy and seats behind him had all turned into big red mushrooms. He was now in a mushroom house, looking at Wen Fengjin outside.

Wang Xiaomie felt like passing away with a smile. *This dream is getting a negative review.*

“Little rabbit, little rabbit!”

Outside, Wen Fengjin flashed a smile as beautiful as flowers at Wang Xiaomie. His overly feminine and handsome face was so attractive it was nearly unreal. His wolf ears flicked back and forth, his wolf tail brushing wildly against the ground. Wen Fengjin broke out into a grin, revealing a pair of sharp fangs, They looked especially savage when contrasted with his beautiful appearance.

Dage, you look like you’re about to eat me.

Wang Xiaomie gulped. Just as he started to tremble with fear, Wen Fengjin suddenly started to sing with deep feeling.

“Good little rabbit, open up the door. I won’t, I won’t, I surely won’t, Mama’s still not home~”[9]

Wang Xiaomie was stunned. “What the fuck! A monster!”

He instantly startled awake from his accidental nap, panting for breath as he fearfully hurried to check his head and behind. His gaze swept over the space around him. “Phew. What a relief. I’ve got no horns on my head, there’s no goat tail on my butt, and the house hasn’t turned into a big mushroom…”

Wang Xiaomie relaxed, wiping the sweat from his brow. He was still in a small, pitch-black wooden room. It was probably dark outside. Beside him, An Xie’s little Purple-Fur had been woken up by the noise, and wriggled slightly within the sack.

Wang Xiaomie lowered his voice, hands covering his chest. A full-body shudder ran through him as he thought back to the well-behaved Wen Fengjin singing Little White Rabbit in his dream.

“Thank goodness it wasn’t real. That dream was *way* too wacky…”

Wen Fengjin, who was like the great demon lord in those novels, singing Little White Rabbit with a soft moe look on his face? Goddamn.

Wang Xiaomie rubbed at the goosebumps on his arm, guessed that it was about time, and brushed off the dust as he rose from the floor and returned to the corner he’d originally been standing in. He stopped speaking or moving, and emptied his gaze as he began to go into “idle mode.”

Inwardly, he wondered what he should do next. He was being puppeteered at the moment, but thanks to Wen Fengjin’s blood ritual, he still had some ability to control his own body right now.

When the time came, Yi Yan was definitely going to pull him and Purple-Fur out to threaten Wen Fengjin and An Xie. When that happened, Yi Yan would also pull out the puppet he was using to control him…

Should I stand behind him and stab a knife into him? Kill him in a surprise attack? Wang Xiaomie felt at the inside of his thigh, where his knife Kaiming was tied. *Kaiming's a magical weapon, so its destructive power is definitely incredible. It can cut through an enemy like tofu, even if they have copper skin and iron bones. But with Yi Yan's vigilance and inhuman battle prowess, could a weakling like me really pull that off?*

Despite Yi Yan's seemingly defenseless, cheery smile, the reality was that Wang Xiaomie would probably be found out the second he pulled out a weapon. And Bai Yu was there too…

The thought of Bai Yu reminded Wang Xiaomie of the scene he'd witnessed earlier. Bai Yu seemed to have no intention of revealing that he knew the truth, making it a mystery what he was thinking. Was he really going to play dumb and keep things going with Yi Yan like this?

A bunch of random thoughts flew wildly through Wang Xiaomie's mind. He couldn't beat Yi Yan in a fight. He wasn't able to trust Bai Yu right now either. And he had a legless little Purple-Fur with him, too… Wang Xiaomie was getting a serious headache. *Oh heaven! Oh earth! Show me a little pity here!*

But when he thought of the fact that his little Wenzi had mostly predicted Yi Yan's moves, and even planned solutions for the various possibilities, he felt reassured. This really was a decisive battle between two big bosses. Small fry like him could never predict how it would go. Personally, Wang Xiaomie absolutely believed that his little Wenzi was the more fearsome of the two. So what was with this inexplicable sense of unease?

He pressed a stiff hand against his chest. The same sense of worry and foreboding he'd had back in the mausoleum welled up within him once again, stuffy and uncomfortable.

He sat there idly like that until daybreak, when the wooden building echoed with the sound of multiple objects being dragged around. This was accompanied by the loud clank of metal bumping against wooden sticks, or something of the sort. In that instant, it felt like a great number of silent, wordless workers had shown up outside.

Wang Xiaomie frowned. "Could they be villagers?"

But he hadn't seen any villagers when he came here.

The noise outside was still increasing, and it was happening extremely close to this room as well. The room's doors and windows were the old-fashioned kind covered with pasted paper, so with them shut the room was extremely dark.

The dimness of the room impacted his vision but enhanced his sense of hearing, making the sound of things getting pulled along the ground increasingly clear in his ears, to the point it seemed as if the sandy ground being raked across was pressed right against his eardrums.

The fine hairs on his body started to stand up one after the other.

Black irises slowly shrinking, Wang Xiaomie pursed his lips and looked over at the large sack off to the side. Purple-Fur was probably slightly injured, as he'd been resting ever since their conversation. The noise was far too close, yet he heard not a word spoken, only the sound of things being dragged along.

Wang Xiaomie rubbed his arms, straining to move his body as he staggered one step at a time over to the wooden door, the noise getting

clearer with his approach.

What could it be…

Wang Xiaomie quietly sucked in a breath, stopping softly before the door, and slowly pressing his face closer to it. There was a corner of the newly pasted window that hadn't adhered properly. He used a fingernail to carefully pry it slightly more open, then pressed his eye against it.

The first thing he saw was a light brighter than what was in the room, causing his black eyes to quickly contract and expand again. Once he'd adjusted to this level of brightness, the next thing he saw was someone stumbling in the far right of his field of vision, pacing back and forth by his door with a lowered head and a heavily swaying body.

That person wore an average T-shirt with purple-blue stripes on it. His pants were also the kind of trousers you'd find for around twenty bucks on the market, and a somewhat-worn belt was clasped around his waist. His body was leaning to the right, as if he was pulling some cumbersomely heavy object.

The sound of metal and rocky sand scraping together was enough to make your gums hurt.

Wang Xiaomie's single eye peeked through the hole at the edge of the dusty white paper, carefully sizing up the scene. As the figure came closer, this black eye blinked, catching sight of the thing in his hand.

It was a copper-gold broadsword, three or four centimeters thick and about as wide as a saber. It would probably be as tall the man's waist if stood on end.

No wonder he was dragging it along. Just imagine how heavy a sword that big must be!

When Wang Xiaomie cast his gaze off into the distance, there were silent villagers dragging broadswords all around the other buildings as well. Men and women alike, all gloomily walking along with lowered heads as they circled around the location they were living in.

As he looked at their weapons, Wang Xiaomie quietly muttered to himself, “Didn’t they say gold tools are the hardest to refine? So how come they’re getting handed out like it’s an assembly line here at Yi Yan’s place?”

He’d thought his voice was acceptably low, but the second he said this, the villager loitering in front of their door immediately froze in his tracks.

Fuck, what kinda ears does this guy have?!

Wang Xiaomie was about to back away from the doorway when he saw the villager raise his head in his direction.

What?

His mind went blank when he got a clear look at his face. His lips trembled slightly.

There was no face…

This guy’s face was as flat as a wooden board! There was no mouth, no nose, and no eyebrows, only a single giant bloodred eye occupying nearly his entire face!

And now that bloodred eye was spinning around to look right at Wang Xiaomie. “Hss—”

Wang Xiaomie gasped, his arms and legs going ice-cold. He stiffly took a couple of steps back, nearly screaming aloud.

Monster!

He turned and ran, rushing over to Little Purple-Fur and dragging it quickly over to the corner of the room. Pale and breathing rapidly, he squatted down, his gaze fixed in the direction of the door.

He could make out a human figure in the doorway. Wang Xiaomie was now so nervous that his body's slow-beating heart nearly leapt into his throat, but the monster didn't move. The door was locked from the outside, and Wang Xiaomie didn't hear the creature unlocking it.

The monster stood there, unmoving.

Wang Xiaomie didn't even dare to blink as he stared at the door, his hand tightly gripping Little Purple-Fur's sack.

Time seemed to slow down; it was hard to tell if an hour passed, or only a few minutes, before the shadow at the door finally disappeared.

He was gone… A freezing Wang Xiaomie collapsed to the floor, taking a moment to recover before wiping the sweat from his brow.

That blank face and its huge bloodred eyeball endlessly replayed in the sea of his mind. Wang Xiaomie pursed his lips, unable to resist swearing aloud. "Fuck! That damn freak!"

What kind of fricking demonic aesthetic standards does he have, to make puppets that look like this?!

No wonder I didn't see any villagers. This entire village was temporarily built by those terrifying puppets. How're we supposed to play this with a village full of monsters carrying dragon-butchering swords?!

Wang Xiaomie counted on his fingers: Wen Fengjin (old), him (weak), Little Purple-Fur (disabled). As for An Xie—with Yi Yan having taken that many weapons and grave robbers to go pick a fight with him,

plus his preexisting “Ancient Lancer Luck E” debuff, he might as well be considered “sick” now.

So, having categorized the four of them as old, weak, disabled, and sick, how, pray tell, were they going to kill a village full of dragon-butchering sword-wielding monsters, plus Yi Yan, whose strength stats were off the charts? Were they gonna have to rely on pay-to-win strategies?!

Hello, customer service? Gimme a big V8 aristocrat level, the kind that comes with enemy-scattering plot armor.

…There is no goddamn plot armor here. How’re we supposed to deal with this?!

Wang Xiaomie’s face darkened with worry as he stared at the door. Muggy air penetrated the room, the chirping of cicadas sounded restlessly outside, and the air gave off the scent of oncoming mountain rain.

“Fengjin…”

There’d been a 70 percent chance of success at first. Now he had the feeling they should cut that 70 percent in half!

Wang Xiaomie shut his eyes. His thick, black lashes trembled.

A bitter taste filled his mouth.

Chapter 79:
Waiting to Fight Tooth and Nail

THE SUNLIGHT HUNG BLURRILY in the sky, as if there was something obscuring it from view. The stiflingly hot weather made one feel like the rice in an electric cooker. The weed-ridden village was quiet as the dead. Cicadas cried out in full force, and green leaves curled at the edges from the heat.

A thunderstorm was brewing in the gloomy sky.

That afternoon, large swaths of black clouds suddenly came crashing down on all sides. The sky darkened in seconds and warm air filled with swirls of dusty yellow earth, sending bits of sand clattering against the windows.

The rising wind forebode the coming storm…

Half an hour later, the first roll of thunder sounded on the horizon.

The young general wore golden armor and a beast-head girdle. A pitch-black spear inlaid with rings of the finest steel was gripped in his hand, held flat against the ground. He wasn't wearing his helmet or his long feather crown, hair merely tied back and topped with an embroidered forehead band. His posture was carefree and relaxed as he hid behind trees and weeds in a spot outside the quiet village.

This village was newly built, so the surrounding area was verdant with trees, grass, and rocks. Wen Fengjin, hiding his presence on the other side, was also gazing impassively at the village.

“Ha ha. Given how many puppets and weapons he’s got out here, it looks like he hasn’t been slacking these past twenty years.”

An Xie tutted at the sight. The youth had thick brows, large eyes, and a cheery expression on his face, but his eyes were terrifyingly dark as he tilted his head to look at Wen Fengjin. “What do you think, Wen-qianbei? This is a lot more serious than we anticipated.”

Wen Fengjin didn’t reply, his slender, inhuman eyes gazing fixedly ahead. With the smattering of bright red on his forehead, and the silver hair spilling from his red jade crown, he looked unutterably magnificent.

After a moment of silence, he reached a long and slender hand into a pocket in his sleeve, pulling out a tiny bottle of medicine and tossing it over to An Xie. “Take this.”

An Xie caught it easily, holding up the light-green jade bottle and shaking it. “What is it?”

“This is one of my mausoleum’s treasures. It can largely restore you if used when on the edge of death. I had an alchemist refine it for the sake of reviving Shixiong years ago, but because Shixiong and I took the elixir of immortality, its effect on me is very weak. There are seventeen pills in there.”

In the past, he’d gathered all the wealth and riches in the world, collecting countless rare treasures and taking in a wide variety of talented eccentrics. His mausoleum was brilliant, large, and encompassed entire underground veins of the earth. The rarities within were greater in number than the hairs on a cow, gold and pearls as common as grains of sand. Even Fish Pearls, which could restore a person’s sight, were used by the hundreds

in Wen Fengjin's hands as insignificant decorations on Wang Xiaomie's hair ties.

He narrowed his slender eyes, those strange irises—now changed to scarlet—swiveling to shoot a sideways glance at An Xie. Wen Fengjin quirked his lips in a smile. "That will allow you to die seventeen times."

An Xie whistled quietly. "That's some good stuff."

No wonder even the royal family hadn't been particularly rich by the time of his generation, a hundred years later—everything had been plundered from them.

"With this, it won't matter how strong those weapons are against me." An Xie smiled brightly, his shining eyes filled with a burning lust for battle. As a soldier, battle made his blood race far more than any treasure.

"Remember to save one," Wen Fengjin said. "Don't keep it in the bottle. Find it a good hiding spot somewhere else."

An Xie stared blankly for a second before suddenly laughing. "I really admire you brainy types, and I hate you, too. The other side hasn't even played his first piece yet, and in your eyes, the game's already decided."

Wen Fengjin cast him an indifferent look, not saying a word.

"Ha ha! My little emperor's the same way. If he didn't keep plotting against me and tricking me back in the day, and just obeyed me as he should, I would never have broken his legs off and turned us into an underworld husband and wife."

An Xie's smile faded, a burst of vigor rising from his body. He seemed to pay no mind to what he'd just said as he lowered his head to

twist open the sealed bottle, then spilled a single small pill into the palm of his head.

The pill was a deep scarlet color, and had a raw, spicy smell. An Xie muttered “Good stuff” to himself as he used his fingers to tug a red thread out from inside his collar. Attached to this string was an old brocade pouch with mandarin ducks embroidered on it. Some of the golden threads were broken in places, and the corners were frayed as well, but An Xie still took care to keep wearing it close to his skin.

He tilted his hand, dropping the little pill into the pouch, then pulled the red string shut before tucking it away again.

The rumble of thunder sounded increasingly closer in the sky.

“Let’s go.”

Wen Fengjin’s face darkened. He was just about to charge out when An Xie suddenly grabbed hold of his sleeve.

“Wait! Wait a moment!”

Wen Fengjin frowned as he threw off his hand. “What?”

An Xie scratched his cheek, then lifted the bottle of medicine and swung it before their eyes. “I suddenly thought of a problem—this medicine’s a thousand years old. It couldn’t have expired, could it…?”

There was a moment’s silence. Wen Fengjin gazed into An Xie’s large eyes, sneered, then turned with a flick of his sleeves to throw himself at the nearest puppet in the village.

An Xie awkwardly rubbed his nose when that look swept over him like a blade of ice. Watching as Wen Fengjin turned and started fighting, he broke out in a toothy grin, then gave his spear a flashy spin, his full set of

soft armor not impacting his movement in the slightest. The moment he thrust outward with his spear, the careless young man instantly transformed into a bloodthirsty warrior.

“Wait for me, Wen-qianbei!”

He smiled, releasing a loud roar. In the blink of an eye, he brandished his spear and pounced like a ferocious tiger on another of the monstrous puppets.

The rumble of thunder was now louder than ever. Thick layers of clouds gathered, purple-blue lightning flashing through them.

The door of the small wooden building was wide open, its living room open to the outdoors. A few one-eyed puppets circled back and forth with lowered heads, dragging their weapons behind them.

Hot tea was placed at the head of a high tea table where Yi Yan sat, gazing outside with a smile playing on his lips.

The young girl Xiao-An wore a short-sleeved white shirt with Pokonyan on it, paired with a blue vest and skirt. She sat kicking her legs in a wooden chair off to the side, her soft little hands gripping a long, pink so-called magic wand.

Bai Yu didn’t look at her, nor at Yi Yan. He held the puppet representing Wang Xiaomie, a blank expression on his face, gazing off into the distance without any focus.

Behind him, Wang Xiaomie sat leaning against the sack containing Little Purple-Fur, his back against the wall.

Little Purple-Fur let out low, wavering howls, whereas Wang Xiaomie’s gentle, delicately featured face showed no particular expression. His once kind eyes, so full of vitality, now stared dully ahead, making him

look like an average human being who'd lost his mind or suffered some kind of mental illness.

In reality, Wang Xiaomie's heart was as anxious and unhappy as if it were being raked over coals. *There's so many one-eyed monsters outside. I hope Xiao-Wenzi and An Xie will be okay…*

Not long after Wang Xiaomie's discovery that all the so-called villagers were monsters created by Yi Yan, Bai Yu had taken him and Little Purple-Fur over to the building Yi Yan was in.

When he saw how confident Yi Yan appeared to be, Wang Xiaomie's mood started to mirror the weather outside, especially since he kept having that feeling of foreboding. In this muggy weather, every gust of wind was hot, and the gloomy sky only added to the suffocating atmosphere.

Suddenly, Yi Yan paused while drinking his tea. A few strands of hair came loose from the mostly white braid that hung at his back, softening his narrow-eyed features. His mouth twitched at the corners, and he gently set the cup of tea back on the tea table. He cast his gaze in the direction of the village entrance. "They've arrived." He spoke calmly, his narrow eyes curving into crescent moons.

They've arrived? Wen Fengjin and An Xie are here?!

Wang Xiaomie furtively peeked outside while everyone had their backs to him. Little Purple-Fur also seemed to have realized something, his roars weakening as he wiggled restlessly inside the sack.

The door was wide open and directly faced outside, allowing those within the building to take in the exterior at a glance. The monstrous puppets also appeared to sense something, just as Yi Yan had. Just a moment ago, they were still dragging their huge choppers around with their

heads lowered, but now they all straightened up, lifting their heads to turn their ghastly and terrifying faces in the same direction, revealing the humongous single red eye that occupied the entirety of each face.

Inorganic eyeballs rolled around in their sockets as the puppets gripped their sword handles with both hands, blade tips touching the ground.

Yi Yan and Bai Yu also looked in that direction. Cute little Xiao-An, her delicate face devoid of expression, leapt clear off the chair in a single movement, holding that extremely girlish, life-size pink magic wand in her hand. The aura that burst from her body, combined with her fearless posture, made it feel as if she were wielding a brick instead of a pink magic wand. By Wang Xiaomie's reckoning, if you pitted his skills against the girl's Balala Magic Fairy Wand, it'd probably take less than ten exchanges before he was on the ground receiving emergency medical treatment.

Matching the background of dark clouds overhead, with thunder, gales, and flashing lightning, every person present harbored a tempest of different feelings as they waited in full battle array for a bloody fight to the death.

Crack!

The blue-violet lightning in the gray clouds seemed to tear a huge hole in the sky itself. This was followed by an ear-piercing rumble of shiver-inducing thunder.

He'd arrived…

Wang Xiaomie stared blankly into the distance for no discernible reason. He just had a gut feeling.

And as he expected, a second later, the silence was broken by the clear metallic sound of blades. Two one-eyed puppets came flying in from outside, smashing with perfect aim against the frame of the living room door. Their limbs had been broken off, and blue liquid spilled from within. Bit of their bodies flew all over the place like shreds of viscera as they fell to the ground. An unidentifiable *something* rolled over and stopped by Wang Xiaomie's fingers.

But he didn't have the time to look down at it right now. His gaze was firmly fixed on the figure currently walking his way.

Fengjin…

Wang Xiaomie mentally called out his name.

Perhaps it was true what they said about two hearts beating as one—because in that moment, Wen Fengjin's gaze fixed precisely in his direction, even though he was in a room over a hundred feet away, seated behind all the others. Through that tiny sliver of space, their gazes still managed to meet.

Wen Fengjin's lips moved.

Don't be afraid, he silently said. *Shixiong, I'm here to bring you home.*

In that moment, Wang Xiaomie inexplicably felt a dull ache in his chest, accompanied by a sore-at-heart feeling that nearly brought tears to his eyes. It was as if he'd returned to the past, when a wet-behind-the-ears wolf pup turned his back on him and stepped onto that unattainable mountain path to survival. He'd said the same thing then too.

"Shixiong, I'll make sure that you survive."

Silently, Wang Xiaomie thought, *I'll wait for you. I'll trust you, whether it's a thousand years ago or today. I've always known that there was a person, an obsession called Wen Fengjin, who would cross a thousand crags and ten thousand torrents, who would leap over life, death, and time itself, all to stand by my side at the end…*

The sound of applause rang out.

Yi Yan clapped his hands at Wen Fengjin and An Xie, saying, "Welcome, my guests. We've built up quite a bit of resentment between us over the last twenty years, and now is the perfect time to resolve it. No matter which of us dies here, everything will be brought to an end on this day. To celebrate that, I've gone to the trouble of preparing many small presents for the two of you."

He gave Wen Fengjin and An Xie a polite, refined, and extremely outdated gentlemanly bow, before reaching out a hand and snapping his fingers.

A crisp sound rang out.

The wooden buildings in their vicinity all suddenly burst open one after the other, one-eyed puppets trailing out of the darkness to stare at them with glowing red eyes.

Yi Yan lifted his teacup with a small laugh. "Let's begin."

Chapter 80:
A Lancer’s Luck Is Ever E Rank

THEY SAID THAT if the weather changed drastically on a muggy day, the rain that followed was sure to be a storm full of thunder and lightning. Serpents of thunder coiled above, and lightning tore rifts through the dark and heavy clouds.

Crack—

Thunder rumbled over this stretch of earth, bringing with it the overpowering pressure of Mother Nature. Those piled-up clouds seemed to shorten the distance between heaven and earth, pressing down so hard it made one struggle to breathe, while simultaneously invoking a sense of veneration in one’s heart.

On the land under the aegis of the storm, the intense sound of clashing metal repeated in constant, unbroken succession.

Wang Xiaomie could barely keep from staring in wide-eyed, open-mouthed amazement as Wen Fengjin and An Xie fought the one-eyed wooden puppets in the open space of the village outside.

Wen Fengjin wore a red-and-black changpao. His head of snowy, silver hair spilled over his back, seeming to refract light, despite the cloudy sky. That face, with its high brows and slender eyes and the bright red pattern in the middle of his forehead, was as cold as winter frost. Though beautiful, it also carried an overwhelmingly sinister and decisive ruthlessness. The forceful way in which the outfit’s wide red-and-black sleeves swung back and forth at every turn, with each swing of the sword,

each changing move, seemed to blaze like fireworks in the dimly lit world. Fierce, beautiful, bloodthirsty.

To think that Wen Fengjin, who'd once curved his lips in a gentle smile, his shirt wide open, leaning against the pining tree as he drank his wine, had originally looked like this…

Wang Xiaomie stared in awe.

When those icy hands—which once so gently caressed his hair—took up a sword instead, every swing of the blade seemed fit to slice through even that which was intangible, its slender edge ready to cut a gash in your very vision. In the demon lord's hands, that soft sword became a snake opening its gaping maw to reveal its venomous fangs.

The head of a one-eyed puppet went flying into the sky, blue blood splattering across the ground. Through some mystery of its manufacturing, it was still twitching, struggling to get to its feet—only for a gold-lined black boot to crush its chest in a second later.

Those eyes, long and narrow as sharp blades, gazed at it in cold indifference before he quickly turned to rush at another opponent.

In leisure, he could discuss the world with wine in hand. In action, he could set the land atremble with his sword. *This* was the man who'd fought his way out of adversity to dominate the entire world.

As Wang Xiaomie gazed at Wen Fengjin, his eyes filling with that resplendently ominous light, something began to burn within his body, causing him to tremble with uncontrollable excitement.

In his suit of golden armor, An Xie had an even more heroic air to him, like a lone warrior guarding a pass against an army of ten thousand.

His black, unadorned spear was transformed into an earthshaking legendary weapon in his hands.

He laughed heartily, his fighting spirit piercing the skies. Faced with terrifying hordes of one-eyed puppets coming at him with weapons capable of slicing a man in half, he nimbly leaned backward in an evasive maneuver, then pulled back the spear to swing it around his waist. The wintry blade sliced through the air with a *whoosh*, sweeping in a half circle so fast that it left an afterimage in its wake.

A cluster of wooden puppets froze for a moment before huge gashes suddenly tore through their abdomens, blue blood gushing out like fountains. Taking advantage of those seconds of hesitation, An Xie lifted his spear and struck one every second.

In this pre-storm weather, full of surging wind and clouds, the dazzling glare of that cold blade and the ferocity with which it felled waves of enemies was enough to give anyone goosebumps, sending their hearts beating like thunder and their blood racing with excitement. Wang Xiaomie felt as if he were watching a god-tier movie. A dimly lit firmament and terrifying monsters made for the perfect backdrop, and there was no better background music than that immense roar of thunder, sending shivers of awe through the listener. In this moment, he truly felt as if he were being delivered his salvation.

…I'll be honest here, my man is seriously beyond *hot.*

Even Little Purple-Fur started behaving once it heard An Xie's voice. Its mouth formed indistinct roaring and clacking noises, almost as if it was eager to see him again.

Wang Xiaomie was thrown off by this. He'd assumed the creature hated An Xie and wished for something to befall him, so it came as a surprise to see it actually be quite concerned for the man.

"Bai Yu, do you see that?" Yi Yan turned to ask, sounding calm, even leisurely.

"Uh-huh." Bai Yu came back to his senses upon hearing his name. He was clearly just as amazed by this almost entirely one-sided battle as Wang Xiaomie was.

"These are distinguished figures whose names have stayed renowned over a thousand years of history." Yi Yan's smile faded greatly as he continued, "If they were normal human beings, I'd admire them. But they are long dead. The moment they lose the capacity for rational thought and start hurting humans, without us to stop them, how many families do you think might be destroyed?

"I know you're dissatisfied with many of the things I've done, and that you think I'm no different from criminals who commit murder or cross other lines. But Bai Yu, doesn't the sight of their power strike fear into your heart? Have you not stopped to consider what might happen if you stood in front of them? Would they show you mercy? Would you have any way to defeat them?"

Bai Yu looked away, continuing to gaze outside without a reply. Yi Yan made no attempt to press him. Seeing that the situation outside was more or less decided, he turned to the magic wand-wielding Xiao-An and said, "Go on, Xiao-An, give it a try."

"Okay."

There was no real emotion on Xiao-An's delicate face as she obediently nodded, then charged outside, waving the magic wand that was as tall as she was.

When she swung that thing, Wang Xiaomie heard an audible woosh. He gulped. …*How heavy is that magic wand supposed to be?!*

No wonder Xiao-An was the puppet Yi Yan had once called his "greatest masterpiece" (though he'd now decided to make *him* into said greatest masterpiece instead). In the moment she joined the puppet army, Wang Xiaomie came to clearly understand what the difference was between mobs and a mini-boss.

Wen Fengjin and An Xie had been dispatching the puppet crew with ease. The two of them were more than equal to the task of fighting these fearless, one-eyed creatures, despite their foes wielding specially made weapons. These weapons were more effective against a jiangshi like An Xie, but An Xie was extraordinarily dexterous, allowing him to easily dodge the majority of the oncoming blades, while Wen Fengjin was an undying man who'd taken the elixir of immortality. He wasn't a jiangshi, so even if the weapons managed to hit him, they'd only have the expected physical effect—and that was before factoring in the way that Wen Fengjin's body could heal itself.

And so, after a bout of ferocious action, the ground was covered in puppet limbs, heads, innards and blue liquid. It remained a mystery what these puppets were made of, as their bodies appeared no different from those of humans. The fresh blood and flesh brought a disgusted look to Wang Xiaomie's face. He barely managed to keep himself from vomiting.

He lifted his gaze a little to see Xiao-An brandishing her magic fairy wand with all the nimbleness of a member of the family Felidae, trying to split An Xie's skull wide open. Wen Fengjin, meanwhile, didn't spare them so much as a glance.

"Tch!"

An Xie kicked away a charging one-eyed puppet with one leg, then lifted his spear to block the pink magic wand coming down on him from above.

Bang!

The clash of metal on wood created a muffled noise. An Xie's hands went so numb he nearly lost his grip.

"This little lady's got some strength to her!" An Xie gritted his teeth, letting out an angry bark of wolflike laughter, then swung his spear. Xiao-An, expressionless, jumped back as he did, lightly landing on the ground.

A few one-eyed puppets silently made room for her, turning to attack Wen Fengjin instead.

She and An Xie stared at each other. In the blink of an eye, the two were entangled in battle once more.

From Wang Xiaomie's perspective, they moved with lightning speed, their respective weapons becoming pink and black afterimages as they clashed without pause. It was a dazzling display, like someone had turned the scene up to 2× playback speed.

A few minutes later, the two figures, one gold and one blue, each bounced backward.

Xiao-An's shirt was torn at the shoulder, revealing a gash about half the width of a hand from which gushed blue blood. There was also a shallow streak of blood on her neck, the life-threatening position of which spoke to how perilous that encounter really was. But Xiao-An's face showed not the slightest hint of pain. Her soft hands still gripped that elongated pink magic fairy wand, and her inorganic eyes stared fixedly at An Xie.

An Xie, meanwhile, definitely couldn't be said to have the upper hand either.

His entire body was equipped with golden soft armor, so Wang Xiaomie couldn't tell what sort of injuries he might have sustained beneath the surface, but the man had had to contend with one-eyed puppets taking the opportunity to slash at him while he fought against Xiao-An. His unarmored lower leg was covered in cuts. Thanks to the weapons' super-effective nature, the wounds were letting out plumes of white steam, as if someone had poured boiling water over them.

An Xie's gaze darkened as he gazed at the little girl across from him, expression growing serious. He didn't look weakened, but he knew that the girl he was facing was as powerful as a hanba, even if only with respect to physical strength. If she were to work together with the other one-eyed puppets, it would be a scary situation.

As he silently swallowed a mouthful of thick blood, a mix of scarlet and silvery white flashed by the corner of his eye. An Xie's mouth twitched, and he couldn't help turning to lodge a complaint at Wen Fengjin, who was beautifully hunting down his opponents off to the side. "I say…why is this little girl only attacking *me*? And how come there's still so many of these

one-eyed puppets around? You better not be going easy on them, Wen-qianbei."

While I'm at it, your wife's getting preferential treatment, despite being a hostage. How come when my *wife is taken hostage, he gets stuffed in a burlap sack?*

Wen Fengjin suddenly stopped. His silver hair and red-black outfit formed an arc so perfect it stirred the soul, and the soft sword in his hand trembled slightly. His lips quirked upward when he registered the complaint, his slender eyes narrowing. "A Lancer's Luck is Ever E Rank[10]. Don't tell me you've never heard that before?"

An Xie was flabbergasted. *Luck Yi? Yi what? What the heck is Yi supposed to mean?*

Wen Fengjin's smile widened. For some reason, An Xie felt as if he'd just been mocked.

The next instant, Wen Fengjin appeared in front of him with a quick sidestep. The air around them grew even more oppressive, heavy as a ten-ton weight, despite its intangibility. It caused all the surrounding puppets' movements to slow. Even Xiao-An, across from them, tightened her grip on her magic wand. Her back slowly bent, as if being pressed down by a mountain, until she was no longer able to move.

An Xie's eyes widened at this sight. He flicked out his spear, saying, "They're still affected by your dominating aura, even though they aren't human?"

He frowned, then tried doing it himself, causing the scent of blood to fill the air as that oppressive aura unique to hanba came rolling out in torrents. However, there was no change to the surrounding puppets. The

golden swords in their hands emitted a buzzing drone, clearly counteracting the hanba's power.

"So mine doesn't work?"

It seemed these puppets and weapons really were extremely effective against jiangshi. Could it be that because the power of the elixir of immortality didn't count as something evil, they had no way of resisting it?

An Xie sighed, then took out a pill and swallowed it, causing the wounds on his chest and other areas to start healing. "If you had a trick like that, you should've used it sooner. Honestly, Wen-qianbei, you're so—"

"There's a limit to this power," Wen Fengjin interrupted him, his eyes scarlet from the effort of using this ability. "Both in its time and usage. When controlling others, my own movement is hindered, and Yi Yan will still be able to walk under the effects of my aura. An Xie, kill her!"

"You got it."

Swinging his spear, An Xie quirked his lips into a smile, then charged toward the temporarily unmoving Xiao-An.

Chapter 81:
Tools Can Be Exchanged

THE LONG BLACK STAFF came slicing down through the air, light flashing off a section of the cold blade.

Seeing Xiao-An about to get a spear through her throat, Wang Xiaomie turned his eyes away…only for Yi Yan to loudly yell with a serious expression on his face, “Xiao-An!”

In that instant, Xiao-An suddenly straightened up under the weight of that immobilizing pressure.

Thunk—

Her pink magic wand knocked away the oncoming weapon.

The petite girl gave up on attacking An Xie, and threw herself straight at Wen Fengjin instead.

Fuck, what’s going on?

Wang Xiaomie looked over in astonishment, only to find himself dumbfounded by what he saw. Tiny cracks had actually opened up all over Xiao-An’s impeccably human skin, completely covering her exposed legs, arms, and even her neck.

It hurt just to look at. When Xiao-An forcefully struck out with her weapon, blue blood even spurted from the cracks. Wen Fengjin pierced his sword through her chest, causing Xiao-An’s movements to momentarily halt. She staggered, blue blood leaking from her eyes and her head swaying as if her neck could no longer support it.

Her soft hands gripped the sword pierced into her chest as she pulled it out, face still expressionless, with such force that even Wen Fengjin had no choice but to retreat.

An Xie came over to Wen Fengjin's side. "What's going on?"

Wen Fengjin's expression cooled. Not bothering to reply, he chose instead to sneer in Yi Yan's direction.

The man was always yelling about demonic nonhumans, yet he was far more cruel than any of them!

Meanwhile, Wang Xiaomie watched as Xiao-An started fighting Wen Fengjin and An Xie again as if she'd just triggered her ultimate move. The one-eyed puppets took advantage of the situation to add to the confusion. The destructive power of the gold weapons was far too great for An Xie to handle. No matter how extraordinary his skills might be, even an elephant could be bitten to death by enough ants. He was now taking hit after hit, as if he'd drawn all the aggro in the area.

Whenever An Xie was at his limit, Wen Fengjin would switch positions to block the berserk Xiao-An, giving An Xie the time to medicate. As it stood now, the side getting pressured and beaten down had unexpectedly become Wen Fengjin's team.

Wang Xiaomie didn't know why Xiao-An was able to withstand Wen Fengjin's dominating aura earlier, but seeing the change in her behavior, he knew it couldn't be anything good.

Sure enough, Bai Yu's face instantly paled as he viewed this scene. He twisted his head to fix his gaze on Yi Yan, questioning him in disbelief. "What are you doing?! At this rate Xiao-An's core will be irreparably damaged in no time—she'll die!"

Yi Yan’s relaxed smile faded quite a bit as his narrow eyes fell upon Bai Yu. He said, “Now isn’t the time. The hanba and Wen Fengjin have yet to be worn down to the level I desire.”

Bai Yu’s eyes widened in irrepressible anger. He spoke incredibly fast and low as he replied, “We could just use Xiaomie and that purple-furred jiangshi to immediately make them kill each other! Either way, in the end __”

“Bai Yu!”

The cold and detached voice made Bai Yu’s words catch in his throat. His face grew red with the effort of holding back. Yi Yan was very much like a gentle teacher, but when he got angry, he could easily strike fear in a youth like Bai Yu.

Yi Yan said, “Wen Fengjin is an immortal monster, and the hanba is a fierce monster who grew by absorbing the resentment and blood of millions. If we cannot wear them down, then even making them fight until one kills the other, leaving one survivor, won’t guarantee our victory! A monster’s vitality is so indomitable, and their power is so formidable. Are you really unable to see it?!”

“But Xiao-An…”

“Bai Yu!”

Yi Yan and Bai Yu locked eyes.

“Xiao-An is a masterpiece I created, my very best puppet—but a puppet is merely a tool.” Yi Yan turned from Bai Yu’s terrified gaze to look at the people fighting outside, his voice soft as he continued to speak. “Tools must be exchanged…”

Wang Xiaomie, who'd heard the whole exchange, thought, *You dirty bastard.*

That little girl was a person, no matter how you looked at her. Even if she was in essence a man-made puppet, she could still speak and live like a human being. After having her by his side for so long, Yi Yan should have had some level of attachment to her. For him to simply abandon her so easily… Ultimate intellect was certainly ruthless.

Even an outsider like Wang Xiaomie felt bad here. As for Bai Yu—he looked at this man he'd thought was so gentle, so caring, the man he'd believed would give him a happy family. Never in all their time together could he have imagined that this same man was in fact his own blood relative. To hear him say something like this was, in the end, to ruthlessly crush all of Bai Yu's hopes and dreams beneath his feet.

Memories of the time he'd spent with Xiao-An flashing through his mind, Bai Yu pulled his lips into a dismal grin. "I've been thinking of her as my little sister, all this time. She's a member of our family… You're only refusing to call her back because you already have an even better masterpiece, right?"

Yi Yan didn't answer, his expression cold as ice. He wasn't going to allow Bai Yu's unhappiness to introduce a single misstep into in this plan he'd spent twenty years looking forward to enacting.

As he gazed at Bai Yu's silhouette, Wang Xiaomie inwardly sighed sympathetically. *Oh Da-Bai, you silly fool…*

Bai Yu clenched his fists, twisting his head to gaze outside.

An Xie had been swallowing his pills one after the other as more and more shattered one-eyed puppets piled up around him. Xiao-An's right arm

had been sliced off, and an unending stream of blue liquid flowed from the broken stump, soaking her white cartoon T-shirt, blue vest, and skirt.

A pair of crimson and gold figures moved in harmony, drawing a brilliant arc of light across the sky. Dazed, Xiao-An watched herself fly into that the cloud-filled sky. She blinked her large eyes, feeling as if she'd become a cloud herself, floating in the air.

There was an eruption of dazzling white light, eliciting a hint of confusion in those inorganic eyes. And then, she fell downward, catching sight of her own body as she did.

The headless girl's body swayed a few times, fell to its knees, then finally joined the ranks of shattered puppets. Together, they formed a mountain of scrap, like you might find in a junkyard.

Grr…

Bai Yu turned his gaze away from those now-lightless eyes, sitting stiffly in his wooden chair, his teeth clenched tightly.

You could see through the tears in Wen Fengjin's clothes that his wounds were beginning to heal. An Xie sat himself atop a pile of puppet corpses and poured out the contents of his medicine bottle. There was only one pill left inside; he swallowed the pill and sighed. "These puppets are such a pain. That had to be at least two hundred of them, if not three hundred. Even with this medicine to heal me, I'm still beyond exhausted."

He lowered his voice, adding, "Wen-qianbei, if your earlier guess was right, it'll be the two of us fighting each other next. This bastard was already sinister as hell twenty years ago, so if we follow the plan, you're gonna have to be careful in the end." Having said all that, he switched topics with a wry smile: "I'm leaving my and my family's lives in your

hands, Wen-qianbei. So you'd better remember not to deal any deadly blows for real!"

Wen Fengjin nodded, quirking his lips in a smile. "Of course I'll remember."

An Xie stopped talking at that, and started to focus on recovering his strength.

"It seems you're done fighting."

A satisfied expression appeared on Yi Yan's face at the sight of Wen Fengjin and An Xie's injuries. He walked over to Wang Xiaomie and Little Purple-Fur. Wang Xiaomie hurriedly readopted his lifeless appearance as Yi Yan took each of them by one hand and led them out in front of everyone.

Wang Xiaomie stood in place, while the alarmed Little Purple-Fur started to struggle, roaring low, as it was casually tossed down by Wang Xiaomie's feet. "Graaah—"

The white sack squirmed, probably from the pain of the impact. Little Purple-Fur began to quietly call out, sounding incredibly weak.

An Xie's eyes abruptly reddened at the sight, a frighteningly savage look crossing the normally bright youth's face. He stared almost mindlessly at Yi Yan, seeming ready to charge forward and eat the man alive.

"Are these two familiar to you?" Yi Yan smirked as he stood behind Wang Xiaomie. He inclined his head slightly and reached out a hand to caress Wang Xiaomie's cheek.

Wang Xiaomie barely stopped himself from trembling under his touch. Wen Fengjin's face, meanwhile, was quickly starting to match An Xie's.

“Bai Yu.” Very much satisfied by their expressions, Yi Yan called to Bai Yu, “Keep an eye on the puppet you’re holding. If anything happens, snap its neck.”

Bai Yu quietly acknowledged the command.

Yi Yan lifted Little Purple-Fur’s sack with one hand, used his other hand to gently brush dust from his light green magua, then smiled as he looked over at Wen Fengjin and An Xie.

“These two you so cherish are now in my hands. I can, at any time, decide whether they live or die. I could kill them both at once, or I could let one of them go…understand?”

Wen Fengjin sneered. An Xie’s face was so livid with anger that it bulged with veins.

Wang Xiaomie cursed inwardly. *“Your wives are in my hands. Do as I say and I might still let one live.” No one could fail to understand something so straightforward.*

Little Purple-Fur was still roaring inside its sack. It almost caused An Xie to reveal his true jiangshi features, fingernails turning black as quickly as a rising tide. He was just about to charge forward with his spear, however, when Yi Yan said with a chuckle, “Take one more step and I’ll kill him.”

An Xie froze up on the spot, and cursed, “Fuck!”

Wen Fengjin didn’t speak. But the expression on his face was one Wang Xiaomie had not seen since that time they were running for their lives all those years ago.

“Only one can live.” Yi Yan quietly laughed, thin lips rising slightly. His eyes filled with lofty ridicule as he continued, “It doesn’t matter

whether or not you believe me. I need only one to survive between the two of you. The hostage belonging to whichever one of you dies will no longer be of any use to me, so whoever lives will determine which one I spare. Don't try to trick me, hanba. My failure to kill you twenty years ago is my life's greatest regret, but this is when I make up for it."

Neither Wen Fengjin nor An Xie moved. Unbothered, Yi Yan tilted his head, then put strength into his hands, causing Little Purple-Fur to let out a shriek. Wang Xiaomie, unable to control his body, gripped his own neck and started to squeeze… "Are you sure you don't want to begin?"

The man's laughter drifted away into the air. Wen Fengjin and An Xie exchanged a look, then each took a few steps back and raised his weapon.

As this battle to the death filled the air with the stench of blood, a few drops of rain came spattering down, soaking the dusty yellow earth.

Wang Xiaomie was nervous beyond words.

Just when they were about to start, Yi Yan suddenly said, "Hanba, throw down the medicine bottle you have."

An Xie's expression twisted for a second. He spat ferociously, then tossed the bottle to the ground. Yi Yan nodded in satisfaction. "Good."

Damn it, it's a good thing Wen Fengjin already planned for that.

An Xie gritted his teeth as he thought of the pill inside his brocade pouch, then spun his spear in a decorative arc before stabbing at Wen Fengjin with the force of a thousand suns…

Thunder once again sounded across the heavens, and the rain finally came down.

Huge droplets of rain came crashing down fast and hard as the wind blew wildly and the sky outside completely dimmed. It was impossible for Wang Xiaomie to get a clear look at the two. He could only catch the occasional glimpse of a cold blade slicing through the rain with an incomparably eye-catching glint.

His heart filled with fear and anxiety. Yi Yan, meanwhile, didn't turn his gaze away until he'd confirmed that they were indeed locked in fierce battle.

"Bai Yu, get ready. Even if one of them manages to survive, he'll be completely spent. I'll kill that remaining one, then we'll set this place ablaze and leave immediately!"

Wang Xiaomie heard all of this, and inwardly cursed eighteen generations' worth of Yi Yan's ancestors as he pondered how to stab him while his attention was elsewhere.

"I understand."

Bai Yu's reply was lukewarm, and when Yi Yan wasn't looking he glanced sideways at Wang Xiaomie's face. Perhaps it was Wang Xiaomie's imagination, but he felt like the look had some other meaning behind it.

Very quickly, however, the sound of flesh getting cut open and an accompanying grunt forced Wang Xiaomie to anxiously turn the entirety of his attention to what was going on outside, unable to pay Bai Yu any heed.

Chapter 82:
If You’re Gonna Stab Me, Aim for the Kidney

THE MAN’S PAINED VOICE and the sound of splitting flesh were obscured by the heavy rain’s interference.

Wang Xiaomie couldn’t tell exactly whose voice it was, and the mystery was twisting his heart in knots. While he knew that Wen Fengjin and An Xie definitely had a plan, that didn’t stop him from worrying in the least. He tried to suppress his anxiety as he cautiously gazed outside. Huge droplets of rain were now coming down in a torrent, quickly forming rivulets over the ground and turning the yellow earth into a slurry of mud.

When he finally caught the barest hint of a clear glimpse through that curtain of rain, Wang Xiaomie felt his heart sink.

An Xie was injured…

In the rain, An Xie took a step backward and swung his spear out in a half circle, repelling Wen Fengjin’s next strike. The movement of his arm splashed forth a great deal of blood, which was instantly washed away by the puddles below.

They were chilled to the bone by the storm, water pouring from their hair, sleeves, clothes, and even their chins as, seemingly so engrossed in battle that they were seeing red, they threw themselves back at each other after that short rest.

The spear rushed in to stab at Wen Fengjin’s knee, and Wen Fengjin leapt on one leg, weightlessly throwing his entire body into the air. His red changpao looked like a red oilpaper umbrella, scattering droplets around it.

The spear followed close behind, An Xie also leaping upward with weapon in one hand. There was a glint of metal at the end of the spear. The soft sword swayed under the direction of a slender hand, its flexible yet durable form wrapping around the body of the spear and leaving deep marks on its surface, even carving into its core.

But An Xie still didn't loosen his grip, only stabbing forward even harder with a loud roar. Would the next second end in the spear snapping? Or would it pierce Wen Fengjin's chest?

Straining against the dark rain, Wang Xiaomie and the others all widened their eyes.

Sssst—

The two separated seconds after their collision, each landing in the other's original position and retreating slightly.

Who won?!

Everyone held their breath as they watched the quietly unmoving pair.

Suddenly, An Xie slowly collapsed to his knees, viscous blood seeping from his neck. That heroic, finely dressed figure fell into the mud, and didn't move again…

Wen Fengjin gripped the spearhead embedded in his chest. The veins stood out on the backs of his hands as he pulled the weapon free with a grunt from where it was caught between his ribs. The heavy aroma of bitter medicine spread out from him, diluted by the wet air.

In that critical moment, he'd allowed this spear to stab him, and torn its pole to shreds in the process…

Clang!

The bloodied silver spearhead was tossed to the ground. Wen Fengjin's face was white as a sheet, his corpse-like skin even showing a tint of bluish gray. The heart was the most vital point for immortals like them. He put a hand over the injury, eye-piercingly red blood seeping between his pale fingers.

"He's dead…"

A look of delirious joy exploded onto Yi Yan's face as he gazed at the hanba's corpse. His eyes went wide and his pupils shrank; he was unable to stop the corners of his lips from curving wildly upward as his body took him a couple of steps forward.

"He's dead!" Yi Yan kept staring fixedly through the door as he continued, "Ha ha ha! It's been twenty years! Twenty years! What a good death! Ha ha ha!"

He threw his head back with a loud laugh, hands curling into tight fists. He was the very picture of someone whose long-cherished wish was finally fulfilled. He narrowed eyes that could not hide the glimmer of excitement within them, ferociously sucking in a breath of air. "I've gotten my revenge… I finally have my revenge!"

Bai Yu watched him celebrate with cold eyes. Meanwhile, Wang Xiaomie, unable to tell whether Wen Fengjin and An Xie were putting on an act or had really met with tragedy, didn't dare turn his gaze away.

It was at this moment that Little Purple-Fur, by his side, seemed to have noticed something as well. A sound like a puppy sniffing at something came from within the large white sack, following which was a very loud roar.

“Graaaahh—!”

The sack was being audibly clawed up. A ghostly hand covered in poisonous hair reached out of it, flailing in every direction. It wailed piteously as it struggled, the sack rolling back and forth across the ground.

This sound also shocked Yi Yan back to his senses. His joyful expression froze on his face for a moment before he gradually regained his usual calm appearance.

“He’s dead. And so, you have no use to me, either.” Yi Yan walked over to Little Purple-Fur, placed a foot on it, and started to press down…

“Graah—!”

Little Purple-Fur started screaming in pain. Wang Xiaomie gritted his teeth, hand surreptitiously feeling its way toward his leg as he prepared to stab this bastard with his trusty Kaiming.

“Stop stepping on it.”

Bai Yu, who’d been very silent for a while, now said in an indifferent tone, “Purple-haired jiangshi can provide very good components. I want to take it back with us.”

Yi Yan let up some of the pressure, his narrow-eyed gaze sweeping over Bai Yu’s face. The two looked at each other for a moment before Yi Yan moved his foot away entirely in apparent consent.

Bai Yu stood up and carried the struggling Little Purple-Fur over to the corner Wang Xiaomie had previously been in, then tied it to a post.

The heavy sound of footsteps came through sheets of heavy rain. As Wang Xiaomie watched Wen Fengjin walk ever closer to stop in front of

him, he felt a lump in his throat, nearly breaking from the dull-eyed act he'd been keeping up. His eyes welled up with tears.

Wen Fengjin stepped into the wooden building, his entire body soaked through, clothes clinging to his skin. A puddle quickly formed beneath his feet. "I won. It's time for you to make good on your promise."

"Of course I'll make good on my promise." Yi Yan laughed softly, his narrow eyes now sweeping over Wen Fengjin's bloodless face and the slightly trembling hand that gripped his sword. "It must have been a hard-fought victory for you, considering it was a hanba, after all. Even if you have the ability to regenerate, that ability will lose its effectiveness after prolonged use… Isn't that right? Heh heh."

"That isn't any of your business. Return my shixiong to me."

Wen Fengjin's face was as pale as if it were sculpted from ice, his tone of voice so flat and cold that it was impossible to tell how he felt. His slender, inhuman eyes were as scarily scarlet as before, matching the bright red pattern on his forehead. With his head of sodden silver hair, he looked like a terrifying evil rakshasa.

But in Yi Yan's eyes, it was all no more than an empty threat. Wen Fengjin must certainly be seriously injured…

Yi Yan's lips curved in a smile, faint wrinkles appearing at the corners of his eyes. "Before we talk of promises and the like, how am I to know you're not tricking me?" Yi Yan's shrewd gaze swept over Wang Xiaomie and Wen Fengjin, looking very much as if he'd discovered something. This bluff filled Wang Xiaomie with fear, but he calmed back down again upon seeing no change to Wen Fengjin's expression, and quietly listened to their conversation.

“I’m not a young greenhorn. I’ve always cultivated the good habit of leaving myself alternate options.” Yi Yan chuckled, then signaled to Bai Yu and said, “Bai Yu, go take a look and see if the hanba is really dead or not!”

What the fuck, you old fox!

Wang Xiaomie made eye contact with Wen Fengjin, and clearly saw him blink slowly back. On the surface, it looked like the motion was prompted by raindrops on his eyelids getting into his eyes. But Wang Xiaomie, who’d lived closely with him for two consecutive lifetimes, knew this was what Wen Fengjin did when he was thinking.

I knew *you guys were acting! What do we do now? Fuck, we aren’t gonna get found out, are we? Maybe I should go stab him in the kidney right now and get it over with!*

Wen Fengjin seemed to say, *Wait a little longer.*

Wang Xiaomie was stumped.

While they were having this short eye-contact conversation, Bai Yu stood up, picked up the umbrella by the door, and headed out into the storm, slowly making his way over to An Xie’s supposed corpse.

He lightly pushed An Xie’s body over—and found the hanba staring at him with wide eyes, the wound on his neck already completely closed up, his fingers just retreating after stuffing a small brocade pouch back into the collar of his shirt. An awkward look appeared on the hanba’s face as he was discovered. The next moment, he rolled his eyes back in his head, pretending he’d died with his eyes open.

Bai Yu and An Xie were both silent.

An Xie: *You didn’t notice you didn’t notice, I’m dead I’m dead…*

Bai Yu: …*You aren't messing with me, are you?*

In the few seconds before Bai Yu spoke, the air seemed almost to solidify. Yi Yan smiled cheerfully at Wen Fengjin, while Wen Fengjin expressionlessly stared right back. Their matching murderous looks practically sent real sparks into the air, almost as if they were saying "I've already seen through your tricks" and "No, you haven't" with their eyes alone. Wang Xiaomie was stuck in the middle, the men on either side of him emitting increasingly strong murderous intents, overflowing with oppressive auras. He didn't dare move a muscle, didn't dare speak a word, and was honestly about to wet his pants.

It was at this moment that Bai Yu's voice suddenly sounded from amid the storm, shouting, "The hanba really is dead!"

His voice sounded somewhat unreal, thanks to the interference of the pouring rain. And yet, it seemed to have the power to significantly dissipate the congealed atmosphere in the room.

Bai Yu ran back shortly after, putting the umbrella away before nodding at Yi Yan.

Yi Yan couldn't suppress his smile. He looked incredibly happy.

Wen Fengjin indifferently raised his sword to point at Yi Yan and said, "Release the control you hold over my shixiong, then return him to me."

"Ah. About that." Yi Yan lowered his hands. "There's no rush!"

Upon saying this, he suddenly dropped a pair of short, knifelike gold stingers from his sleeves, perfectly catching them in his hands. His pale green figure immediately charged at Wen Fengjin, who dodged the attack with a tilt of his head, a few strands of silver hair flashing as they flew up

into the air. In the next instant, those golden daggers were entangled with his soft sword.

Yi Yan's attack had been launched in extremely close quarters, and his agility made him slippery as a loach. Wen Fengjin frowned, his soft sword dancing like ribbons to draw silver flowers in the air.

Ding ding ding—

The short stingers created sparks with each collision, one of them stabbing at Wen Fengjin's face, only to get blocked. Yi Yan then made a hard twist at the waist, his body nimbly turning in a wide circle as he threw out his other arm to stab his weapon into Wen Fengjin's back.

Ssst—

The short stinger accurately pierced flesh. Wang Xiaomie's eyes widened. He couldn't believe that an average mortal could actually injure Wen Fengjin. When Zhen Bei had injured him previously, it was only because Wen Fengjin was too busy saving Wang Xiaomie to fight back.

Before Yi Yan had a chance to open the wound further, Wen Fengjin kicked him, sending him flying back. His feet tapped a few times against the ground before he was able to steady himself and, not waiting to let Wen Fengjin catch his breath, he immediately tossed the weapon in his hand.

Wen Fengjin turned aside just in time to avoid the attack, only to turn back and find himself face-to-face with Yi Yan.

The two were so deeply entangled in battle that they seemed impossible to separate. Wang Xiaomie finally understood why An Xie was so nervous and on guard when he brought up Yi Yan before…

Is this seriously a human being?!

He watched as Yi Yan attacked with such quickly changing movements that he was on par with the ninjas from a certain anime. He moved so fast that he left afterimages in his wake. This was practically a damn kage bunshin!

Fuck, Yi Yan isn't one of those insanely powerful sweeper monks from the movies, is he?! Can a guy with moves like this really be human?! Gods, you've got to be shitting me!

Wang Xiaomie watched as Wen Fengjin and Yi Yan both gradually became covered in wounds. But Yi Yan was clearly a difficult opponent, and Wen Fengjin's expression was growing increasingly more evil, his eyes becoming redder.

Fearing that the situation was taking a turn for the worse, Wang Xiaomie cautiously cast a glance at Bai Yu, who'd hidden himself behind a pillar to avoid getting accidentally hit while he peeked at them. He didn't notice Wang Xiaomie.

This was the perfect opportunity!

Wang Xiaomie sneakily tugged open his pants, pulling out a seven-inch…ahem, his dagger Kaiming.

Conveniently, Wen Fengjin knocked Yi Yan away at this same moment.

Yi Yan backed up a few steps to stop by Wang Xiaomie's side.

This was his chance!

Wang Xiaomie took aim at Yi Yan's waist, grasping Kaiming to send it piercing forward. *Go, my legendary kidney-stabber!*

Kaiming would have blinked if it could.

Chapter 83:
Backup Plan

MAYBE KAIMING WAS ANGRY at being called a legendary kidney-stabber, or maybe it sensed his fighting spirit. Either way, the dagger suddenly heated up, a dark glow lighting it from base to tip.

Wow~

Wang Xiaomie's eyes widened to a comical size. In his hands, Kaiming seemed to be saying, "Don't bother enhancing me, young man. Quickly send me out!"

You got it!

He stealthily moved behind Yi Yan, who'd momentarily paused in front of him during his battle with Wen Fengjin.

Good…now was the time!

Wang Xiaomie held his breath, his brow bathed in cold sweat. Fearing that Yi Yan would notice any killing intent that might escape from him, he kept repeating "Hallelujah" in his head. After all, that was how it always happened in the movies: Anyone who tried a sneak attack was guaranteed to be discovered by whichever grand martial artist they were targeting, who'd then shout, "Who's there?!"

Finally, Yi Yan paused for a short second before making to attack Wen Fengjin again. An enormous wave of dominating aura exploded from the pale-faced Wen Fengjin, his soft sword trembling as it cried out. Wen Fengjin had been keeping an eye on Wang Xiaomie this entire time, and Wang Xiaomie knew he had no time to give him any signals besides

hurriedly blinking in his direction before mentally shouting in encouragement to himself, then raising Kaiming and thrusting it forward.

It was as if someone had pressed the slow-motion button on time itself. The sweat on his forehead slid down to stick to his lashes, the light green magua in front of him grew closer and closer, Kaiming emanated a bloodthirsty glow—

Shunk.

Wang Xiaomie had closed his eyes, frowning, face turned away. When he felt his hands hit something, even he was shocked by the sensation.

Did I really do it?

No way…

Wang Xiaomie opened his eyes. His hands were tightly gripping his dagger Kaiming. To avoid getting found out, he'd moved very lightly, and been afraid to use too much force, but he hadn't expected Kaiming to be this sharp. That mild push forward was enough to stab into Yi Yan's left side as easily as cutting tofu.

The soft, flaxen magua was cut open to reveal the thin silk shirt beneath, fabric driven into the wound by the knife. Blood instantly poured out to soak the magua, and gradually expanded outward.

Wang Xiaomie gulped, feeling a stinging pain at the crown of his skull. He slowly turned his head to see Yi Yan with an ice-cold look on his face. His gaze pierced Wang Xiaomie's skull like knives before his mouth suddenly broke into a grin.

Wang Xiaomie was stunned.

“Xiaomie! Dodge!”

He suddenly heard Wen Fengjin’s panicked shout. Wang Xiaomie rarely heard him yell this loud, so he withdrew his knife without a second thought and immediately ducked down with hands over his head, protecting his skull and his soft abdomen.

The next instant he felt an acute pain in his shoulder and arm, and his entire body was kicked forcefully back to crash against the chair and tea table. The wooden chair was crushed under his weight. Teacups and an assortment of other things crashed into a heap along with him.

“*Cough*, *cough!* My shoulder—”

Wang Xiaomie painfully caught his breath, using his right hand to grab his left shoulder. He was entirely unable to lift his left arm and shoulder. Even if his sense of pain was dulled, his bones and flesh still hurt like hell.

Damn! That straight-up fractured my bones!

Wen Fengjin had attacked Yi Yan again in the same moment, his flexible soft sword moving with impossible agility. The sword’s blade even trembled at random when you hit it, making it extremely easy to cut your hand if you weren’t careful.

Yi Yan wanted to kill Wang Xiaomie, and Wen Fengjin was standing in his way. Wang Xiaomie hurriedly pushed past the pain to get up and run to the corner of the room.

Kaiming was a magical weapon created to assassinate monarchs, and had bloodletting grooves down its blade, which was thin at the edges and thick in the center. When stabbed into a person’s body, it was guaranteed to

leave a grievous wound, the sole purpose of a one-hit kill. Given the medical techniques of ancient times, its victims were doomed.

So now that Yi Yan was injured, even if he was as tough on himself as he was on others—able to endure the pain and continue fighting in close-quarters combat—he could no longer move as awe-inducingly fast as before.

Now that they were at this point, Wen Fengjin also dropped the pretense of weakness, quirking his lips upward in a smile that wasn't a smile. With a toss of his sleeves, his sword slashed open Yi Yan's arm.

"So you were all tricking me!"

It was impossible for Yi Yan not to have figured it out by now. He was an intelligent man, and it didn't take him long to grasp the situation. But he also seemed to understand that Wang Xiaomie hadn't completely avoided imbibing his poison.

His face darkened. "Bai Yu! Break the puppet's neck!"

Even if the heart was what you needed to aim at to kill immortals like them, destroying the puppet would still cause Wang Xiaomie to lose control of his body and rip off his own head. There was no way this monster could still live without a head!

At Yi Yan's shout, everyone turned to stare at Bai Yu, behind the pillar. Bai Yu showed no sign of fear. Instead, he calmly raised the puppet in his hand.

"Stop playing dead—the situation's changed!"

Wen Fengjin frowned, feet pushing lightly off the ground as he shot toward Bai Yu at blinding speed. Yi Yan was about to stop him when a

sound split the air, moving through the curtain of rain. Two rocks hurtled past his ears.

Yi Yan was forced to skid to a halt, watching as the formerly dead An Xie appeared in the doorway. An Xie shook the water off his hair and body, then flashed a grin at Yi Yan. “Yo.”

Those narrow eyes widened slightly, Yi Yan’s normally calm and collected face revealing a look of disbelief. He instinctively turned to look at Bai Yu, who gazed right back at him. Those round, catlike eyes no longer held the vivacity or innocence they once had, nor did they show any sign of happiness. All that could be seen within them was coldness and a hint of relief.

Before Yi Yan could voice any questions, he found himself held back by An Xie.

Bai Yu watched Wen Fengjin approach without the slightest hint of fear. He gently tossed him the wooden puppet, saying, “You can have it.”

A pale and slender hand took hold of the puppet, narrow eyes sweeping over Bai Yu’s expressionless face. Wen Fengjin didn’t kill him. Nor did he have anything to say.

This human had poisoned his shixiong. He deserved to die. But if he killed him, Shixiong would surely be unhappy, and might even fall out with him.

This human had probably also helped to cover up An Xie’s deceit.

Wen Fengjin turned around, choosing to ignore Bai Yu in favor of going to Wang Xiaomie’s side. He tore all the strings off of the puppet, and a strange sensation swept over Wang Xiaomie’s body, making him feel suddenly more relaxed.

He returned to that familiar embrace, smelling that bitter medicinal aroma and the moist scent of water as he threw his arms tightly around Wen Fengjin.

“Don’t be afraid…”

Chilly fingers pressed against the roots of his hair, threading through the strands, and Wen Fengjin placed a gentle kiss on his forehead. The wound on his shoulder began to heal, feeling itchy, swollen, and a tiny bit tender. Wang Xiaomie thought to himself that this was definitely the reason tears were dripping down his face. Definitely not him being delicate!

“Xiaomie?” Wen Fengjin gently called his name.

Wang Xiaomie wiped his tears against Wen Fengjin’s chest, but the man’s clothes were already wet, so now his entire face was soaked. “I’m fine.”

He lifted his head to reveal a thoroughly reddened nose and eyes. The silver-haired, ice-cold man stared at him for a moment, then laughed, “You’re crying?”

“I’m not!” Wang Xiaomie shot him a glare.

Wen Fengjin chuckled low, and an embarrassed Wang Xiaomie angrily smacked him with a fist.

“Heeeey, excuse meeee—”

A man’s exasperated voice broke in, and An Xie said with a wry smile, “Qianbei, could you and your wife hold off on the PDA for a bit and come help me?”

Wang Xiaomie blinked. *Shit, I totally forgot about that.*

He hurriedly pushed at Wen Fengjin, who withdrew his smile. He reluctantly stood back up, sword in hand, then helped Wang Xiaomie to the sidelines.

An Xie could fight Yi Yan to a draw, and even do a little better than that, but he'd been worn down too much by the earlier battle. When Wen Fengjin joined the fray, Yi Yan's expression turned sour. "You are both legends from the pages of history. Don't you think two against one is overdoing it?" he asked through gritted teeth.

An Xie looked at him with a grin. "Not at all. Didn't you know I went down in history as a blackguard guilty of high treason?"

Wen Fengjin smiled as well, saying, "In the history books, I'm known as the Demon Lord."

In summary, neither of them resembled a good guy in any respect. In fact, they were villains.

Yi Yan had nothing to say.

Now that communication had failed, no option remained but to have an honest and straightforward fight. The three of them once more threw themselves into the battle.

Wang Xiaomie guardedly looked over at Bai Yu, and found him looking spaced out, as if he'd lost his soul. He nervously turned his gaze back to the trio of fighters.

Fights between master combatants always moved very quickly. There were no showy special moves, nor any mouthing off or yelling the names of moves like "XX Blade!"

A few minutes later, Yi Yan was pierced in the chest. Bloody froth spilled from his mouth, and he fell motionless to the ground, eyes wide.

Did they win?!

Wang Xiaomie breathed a sigh of relief, and An Xie and Wen Fengjin's faces relaxed as well. An Xie, still worried about his Little Purple-Fur, quickly turned to look at his wife while Wen Fengjin frowned, lost in thought.

"Is he dead?" Wang Xiaomie quietly asked, clutching his arm.

Wen Fengjin replied with a hum, "He should be."

…*Is that really what you should be saying here?* Wang Xiaomie's lips twitched, but he did understand what Wen Fengjin was thinking. After all, Yi Yan barely seemed human. It was only to be expected that they'd greet him being dispatched so easily with disbelief.

Wen Fengjin looked at Yi Yan's corpse for another few seconds, then lifted his head, gaze fixing upon Wang Xiaomie's face. When Wen Fengjin saw him, that frosty expression finally melted. Soft sword in hand, Wen Fengjin turned to walk toward Wang Xiaomie.

On his end, An Xie had already let Little Purple-Fur out of its bag. His precious baby was so fully enveloped in his embrace that only a hint of its fur was visible as An Xie lowered his head to look over its injuries.

Bai Yu, meanwhile…

After Yi Yan fell, Bai Yu's face twisted for a moment. A painter's palette of mixed emotions flitted across it before disappearing entirely, leaving nothing but two lines of silent tears.

Everyone thought that was that.

But the next instant, Wang Xiaomie looked in horror at Yi Yan's body, which seemed to have twitched. "Fengjin, look! He moved, fuck!"

Wen Fengjin and An Xie both paled, quickly turning to look at the corpse on the ground. A great transformation suddenly overtook Yi Yan's body. His salt-and-pepper hair turned black, the few lines at the corners of his eyes smoothed out, and the wounds to his chest and other areas gradually started to heal.

Under Wang Xiaomie's terrified gaze, his narrow eyes suddenly opened once more. "Oh my god! He came back to life!"

"No, that's not it!" An Xie put down Purple-Fur, quickly wrapped him in the sack, then rushed over. "It's the same damn trick as before! He must've used the blood again!" He'd seen this before, twenty years ago. Considering the huge losses he'd suffered back then, there was no way he could forget this sight!

What?!

Wang Xiaomie's mouth twitched as he watched Yi Yan, looking at least ten years younger, with a head of black hair and a ruddy complexion, get up off the floor. Not only did he look none the worse for wear, he even looked like he'd gotten a beauty treatment.

The now twenty-year-old Yi Yan tilted his head like a damn ghost as he said, "Did you think you were the only ones with a backup plan? Heh heh."

Wang Xiaomie was stunned silent.

Wen Fengjin and An Xie exchanged a look, then both attacked without another word. What point was there in talking? Better to just kill him again!

Chapter 84:
The End

YI YAN HAD SECRETLY HIDDEN a great deal of Yan Chun's blood. As Wang Xiaomie squatted in the corner, watching them entangle themselves in combat, big villain Yi Yan gave them a show of what it meant to repeatedly die, followed by "Hey, I'm alive again."

By this point, An Xie was fully transformed into hanba form: his entire body a blue-violet color, his eyes filled with red veins, his face ghastly to look at, a pair of sharp teeth protruding from his mouth as he unconsciously panted for breath. One of Yi Yan's weapons sliced his stomach open wide enough to make his guts spill out. Because of the weapon's repressing attributes, the wound was unable to heal, emitting a plume of white vapor instead. An Xie stopped up the wound with a hand, leaning against the wall to rest, which left Yi Yan with only Wen Fengjin as his opponent.

Soon enough, even Wen Fengjin was covered in new injuries. He'd even been pierced right through his thigh and arm, which were slowly healing on their own.

"Wen-xiansheng's going to die…"

Bai Yu suddenly came up to Wang Xiaomie's side and said this. Wang Xiaomie glanced up at him, brow furrowing.

"I don't really know how to beat him either, but if that blood really was all-powerful with no side effects, he wouldn't have hidden it from me." Bai Yu lowered his gaze. "So I think this stuff's gotta have a time limit, or

some other downside. If they can stall him for long enough, it's possible something might happen to turn the tables in your favor."

Wang Xiaomie tightened his grip on Kaiming, pulling his gaze away from that end to look at Bai Yu again. "Why are you telling me this?"

Bai Yu was silent for a moment before his lips drew up in an extremely cheerless smile. "I said before that I was wrong, but I never realized how seriously wrong I really was. I thought that since Yi Yan-laoshi's long-cherished wish was to eliminate the hanba, once he really killed that hanba, I could convince him to give up on hurting you and Wen-xiansheng, then leave this place with him and go somewhere else to live… But now I know that's impossible. He needs to use your body to make a puppet, he isn't going to give me a family, and he never actually cared about Xiao-An or anything that happened in the past. I'm a total mess. I don't know what to do next. All I want is to finish all of this, to have everything end right here…even if Yi Yan is my grandpa…"

Bai Yu fell silent for a moment, and Wang Xiaomie sympathetically stood up to pat his shoulder. "Try not to take it to heart, Da-Bai… It's hard to avoid first loves being kinda tragic when they die." *Though in your case, this first love is a full-on soap opera tragedy…*

Bai Yu's eyes finally regained some of their light, his smile becoming a little more genuine. "Thanks, Xiaomie, for still being willing to be nice and comfort me at a time like this."

"Don't put it like that…" Wang Xiaomie shook his head.

What kind of people *hadn't* he encountered in his past life? During his time in the Northern Kingdom, a totally devoted family member could turn around and discuss how to kill you behind your back. Your most

trusted subordinate might turn out to be a spy sent by the enemy. He and Wen Fengjin were once expendable victims, and also the doers of harm.

After seeing and experiencing enough of that sort of thing, it honestly didn't get to him as much anymore. Wang Xiaomie was used to thinking kindly of others, and just as used to coolly accepting it when those people revealed their bad sides. There was absolutely no black or white in human nature. When Bai Yu betrayed him for love, he'd thought up counter strategies with Wen Fengjin in a very practiced manner, not feeling particularly hurt by the turn of events.

Just as they were talking, a change occurred on the battlefield. Wen Fengjin had been stabbed in the chest, his femininely handsome, incredibly evil face becoming pale as a female ghost's. Dust caked his silver hair, and his full lips were turning blue. Only his eyes and the pattern on his forehead remained the same bright color as before.

Meanwhile, Yi Yan had no visible injuries. He tossed his long black braid behind him with a hand, a mild look on his ruddy, youthful face as he met Wen Fengjin's gaze with a smile.

"This isn't good!" Bai Yu said with a frown, "It looks like they can't stall him any longer—we have to go help out."

Wang Xiaomie was already about to throw himself forward at the sight of Wen Fengjin injured. He immediately nodded at the suggestion, only for Bai Yu to grab his wrist just as he was going to join the fray.

He asked, "What is it?"

Bai Yu was silent for a moment. "I've actually always wanted to ask… Xiaomie, you and Wen-xiansheng are both from the same time

period, and you're Wen-xiansheng's shixiong, so… Can you do martial arts?"

"…I can't."

Bai Yu stared in silence.

"Shit, what's that look supposed to mean?! So what if I can't? I've been dead for over a thousand years! It's perfectly normal for me to forget something so fantastic as martial arts, okay!" Besides, when he'd transmigrated, all his kung fu skills had relied on the system cheating for him!

"…Ahem. I don't mean anything by it, but if you can't, then won't charging in just be serving yourself up on a platter? How about this—I'll go stop my grandpa and earn you guys some time. You go see if Boss Wen's got any ideas."

Wang Xiaomie cast a glance at Bai Yu's impossibly young, beautiful grandpa, who could take on ten people in a fight by himself. "…Take care of yourself, Da-Bai."

"I know." Bai Yu nodded at him before quickly running over to Yi Yan.

Wang Xiaomie headed for Wen Fengjin, hurriedly helped him up, and proceeded to give him a no-frills, to-the-point summary of what Bai Yu had told him.

At this point, An Xie, one hand covering the gaping hole in his belly, silently reached out with the other to get some of Wen Fengjin's blood on it, then brought the bloodied hand to his mouth.

He said, "Ahem, blood with healing properties shouldn't be wasted."

Wang Xiaomie blinked.

“If what he said is true, then stalling is all we *can* do.” Wen Fengjin looked over at Yi Yan as he continued, “An Xie and I aren’t in the best condition after being worn down so much earlier, but the elixir of immortality is extremely potent. That means its side effects will likely be significant, too.”

An Xie and Wang Xiaomie nodded. An Xie continued sneakily stealing blood, while Wen Fengjin stopped speaking and pressed a hand to his chest, his face so pallid that Wang Xiaomie couldn’t help feeling afraid.

Meanwhile, Yi Yan’s face darkened as he looked at Bai Yu blocking the way in front of him. “Bai Yu, what are you doing?”

Bai Yu’s face was even darker than Yi Yan’s. He said in a chilly tone, “You must be blind if you can’t tell that I’m trying to stop you…Grandpa!”

Yi Yan froze at that, his gaze flashing. “You know?”

“Heh heh. That’s right. You must be disappointed that you couldn’t keep me in the dark forever.” Bai Yu clenched his hands into fists as he continued, “Was it fun to play tricks on me?! Were you using my feelings on purpose…? You knew how I felt about you a long time ago, didn’t you?! I bet you’re disgusted!”

Yi Yan had nothing to say to that.

A heated dispute had arisen between Bai Yu and Yi Yan, and the look on Bai Yu’s face was getting uglier the more he talked. When he thought of Xiao-An, whom he’d regarded as a sister, and the way Yi Yan had deceived him, those feelings he’d so carefully cherished—those feelings that led him to betray his friends without hesitation—became a point of shame that would make anyone laugh their head off if they heard about it.

But Yi Yan, aside from being stunned and ill at ease when Bai Yu first started questioning him, made no attempt at defending himself. It was basically a tacit acknowledgment. Bai Yu's face was bright red from anger and agitation, his resentment-filled gaze piercing Yi Yan.

After a moment of silence, Yi Yan said, "I must dispose of nonhumans. Your grandmother was killed by these monsters, and your father, too. Bai Yu, get out of my way."

Bai Yu laughed. "Even if you were originally doing it to avenge Grandma, what about after?! You're just venting your anger! You disappeared for so many years, my dad disappeared and died because he was looking for you, my mom died of illness in her own bed, and I was left all alone. Meanwhile, you were on the sidelines coldly watching the entire time! Did you ever consider how I felt while you were watching all this? Did you ever care when you were using my feelings to your advantage?"

Yi Yan didn't reply.

Bai Yu angrily roared at him, "Give back Xiao-An, you cold-blooded monster! Give her back!"

"I told you she was just a manufactured tool!"

"She was a *person*!"

Bai Yu was panting heavily. Then he suddenly grew calm, an insane smile crossing his face as he said to Yi Yan, "You say other people are monsters, but just look at yourself right now. *You're* the monster. If you say Xiao-An was a tool, then one of these days, I'll make you into a tool too! I'll make sure you know how she felt! I'll kill you… You aren't my grandpa, and you aren't my teacher, either. You're an utterly obsessive demon!"

After saying all this in a low voice, Bai Yu suddenly laughed and lunged at Yi Yan, gripping a teacup shard he'd picked up from who-knew-where and aiming it at Yi Yan's neck.

Yi Yan looked at his only grandson and raised a hand to block the shard of porcelain. It pierced his palm and scarlet liquid spilled from the wound. The look on Bai Yu's face was one of pure elation.

When he made to pull the shard back out, however, Yi Yan gripped his arm and pulled, causing Bai Yu to stumble forward a few steps—at which point Yi Yan hit him in the back of the head, knocking him out.

He gently moved Bai Yu over to the wall behind him, his gaze lingering for a moment on that now-peaceful face before he stood to walk over to Wen Fengjin and the others.

Wen Fengjin pushed Wang Xiaomie behind him, straightening up with sword in hand, while An Xie silently stood beside him.

"Fengjin…" Wang Xiaomie quietly said as he gazed at his back.

"It's going to be fine." Wen Fengjin didn't look back. His deep, husky voice actually sounded more cheerful than heavy as he said, "I won't die—I still need to build you that nest in the pining tree, and watch you hatch a flock of chicks."

Hearing Wen Fengjin bring up the joke he'd made back when he'd had the feather pattern on him, Wang Xiaomie felt his mouth crack open in a failed attempt to laugh.

The figure before him flashed away, and the crisp sound of metal on metal rang out in the spacious living room.

Wang Xiaomie's eyes widened. His vision quickly blurred with tears, but he refused to look away. No matter what happened, he needed to be

witness to it all.

Yi Yan really was very strong.

Even if he'd previously used the mob strategy, Xiao-An, and the "one of two" threat to wear down Wen Fengjin and An Xie, they weren't average humans at all. And still, Yi Yan was able to contend with the both of them.

He first attacked An Xie with a stubborn death glare, refusing to stop even after Wen Fengjin injured him multiple times. An Xie, who already had a huge gash in his stomach, cursed, "You old fox!" It wasn't long before he was forced to retreat, an ugly look on his face.

Wang Xiaomie helped support him, gazing worriedly at the center of the room.

The red-and-black outfit fluttered through the air and the snakelike soft sword in his hand struck with overwhelming ferocity against his opponent. Yi Yan used his dual stingers to quickly and cleverly hit certain points on the sword, sending a ripple through the blade that made it change direction toward Wen Fengjin. Wen Fengjin flung out his arm in a single strong movement, forcefully straightening out the sword.

Yi Yan smilingly looked at Wen Fengjin's chest. "You won't be able to hold out for much longer."

But Wen Fengjin responded with a quirk of his lips, saying, "I should say the same to you."

Two pairs of eyes stared at each other. In the next moment, they both moved at the same time.

The cold blades filling the air were even more overwhelming than the rain outside, the cacophony rattling the onlookers' hearts and vision. An

enormous gust of wind blew a torrent of rainwater indoors, huge droplets instantly getting sliced into fragments.

A golden stinger pierced Wen Fengjin's shoulder, while the sword aiming for Yi Yan's throat was blocked by another stinger.

"It's over." Yi Yan sneered, stabbing his stinger hard into Wen Fengjin's neck.

"Fengjin—" Wang Xiaomie yelled, while Wen Fengjin moved to try to block the attack with a hand.

In that instant, the presumably knocked-out Bai Yu suddenly leapt onto Yi Yan's back, throwing his arms around his shoulders and forcefully leaning backward. Astonishment was writ large on Yi Yan's face as the surprise attack caused him to stumble, leaning his head back in surprise. Naturally, Wen Fengjin didn't ignore such an opportunity. He threw out his soft sword to wrap around Yi Yan's neck.

Ssst—

Black pupils widened. A feeble voice and a spouting stream of blood droplets were washed away by the storm.

Bai Yu fell to the floor, woodenly wiping the blood off his face as he stared at the corpse lying by his side. His entire expression then twisted, and he burst into loud and manic laughter.

Wang Xiaomie watched this scene in disbelief, only regaining his senses once a bloody and battered Wen Fengjin wrapped his arms around him.

It was over…

As Wang Xiaomie looked at the droplets of blood dripping like rain from Wen Fengjin's body, he was reminded of the narrow escape they had so many years ago, and fiercely hugged Wen Fengjin. Hearing the pained grunt the man made, he couldn't help but laugh. "It's over—we won!"

"Mm-hm."

"We all survived, Fengjin—we all survived—"

Wang Xiaomie couldn't stop his voice from choking up. Wen Fengjin placed a hand against the back of his head, pulling him to his chest without a word.

An Xie grinned, limping over to sit by Little Purple-Fur and pull him into a one-armed hug.

The rain continued to pour down outside, splashing over the jumbled wreckage of the puppets.

"Xiao-Wenzi."

"Mn."

"Let's go back to the mausoleum."

"All right."

This time, no matter how many thousands of years go by, we'll always be by each other's side…

Chapter 85:
Epilogue

“THIS MOUNTAIN OF OURS has a mountain god.”

In a rainy mountain grove, an old man sat on a small campstool, smoking a pipe as he gazed at the storm outside. It was hard to tell if he’d spoken the line consciously or not.

The three backpackers who’d ducked into the temple to get out of the rain all exchanged looks with each other. The eldest of them shook his head, so the other two men, young and sturdy-looking, squatted down together and played mute.

The wooded mountain ridge was a winding one, and they’d arrived at this temple halfway up its length just as the mist was fading and rain was about to fall. The limestone tiles were newly placed, and the small temple’s paint and decorations were all brand-new, as well. It looked like it’d been recently built in the past year or two. Some rich guy somewhere must be beyond bored, if they were tossing money around to build temples in a place like this.

The village at the foot of the mountain wasn’t doing so well economically, with not a single cell phone present. The temple only had a single old man to watch over it, and he couldn’t possibly pose any kind of threat. Moreover, the mountain god the old man spoke of was nothing but unfounded nonsense to them.

The mountain rain quickly stopped, water vapor winding around the great jade-green mountain. The view was even more extraordinarily

beautiful when viewed from the temple door.

The three backpack-carrying men waited a little while after the rain ended before standing up and preparing to head out. As they were about to leave, the older of them turned to the old man in charge of the temple and quietly said, “Thank you.”

The old man lifted his dark, wrinkled face, took a puff of smoke, and slowly blew it out. “Go past this temple, and everything up the mountain’s a restricted area, lads. The mountain’s got a god. This old man’s not lying.”

“We understand. Thank you, Grandfather.”

The middle-aged man gave an insipid smile, then turned and left the temple.

The old man shook his head as he watched their receding figures head up the mountain, and gently tapped his pipe against the threshold. “Kids these days just don’t listen. *Sigh.*…”

“Uncle Tai, what kind of fantastic thing was that old man talking about?” one of the sturdy men asked as they stepped into the grove and got rainwater all over them.

The middle-aged man called Uncle Tai shook his head. “It’s nothing, just an outdated superstition.”

“Oh.” The other man made a noise of acknowledgment, then asked, “Uncle Tai, do you think we’ll be able to hunt down any goods?”

“Of course we can. The info I got was very accurate. Someone once saw Siberian musk deer—an endangered species—on this mountain. Even if there aren’t actually any Siberian musk deer here, given how huge an area this undeveloped forest covers, it’s got to have countless mountain apes and other exotic animals. Enough to make this trip worth it.”

“You’ve got a point there.”

The younger man said nothing more. Now, the one who’d been silent this whole time coldly spoke up. “It’s not a bad time for it. Since it just rained, all the animals will emerge to search for food. Let’s hurry and put down the traps now. Once we’ve accomplished our objective, we’ll head down the other side of the mountain. There’s someone who’ll meet us there.”

With that, the three quickly lifted their packs with practiced skill to reveal the tools inside, then split up to start setting up traps along the animal tracks on this section of the mountain.

They moved extremely quickly. It wasn’t long before they’d finished putting down foothold traps and regular steel wire for catching smaller animals. The men had solid survival skills; they found a series of protruding rocks that would shelter them from the wind and rain, then set up a fire and pot there and quietly began to wait.

With the rain gone, a pair of brown Siberian musk deer about the size of sheep, with short front legs, long back legs, tiny hooves, and large ears, came leaping through the dewy undergrowth. Their black noses sniffed at the scents in the air as their limpid cervine eyes reflected the forest they depended on for survival. These musk deer, which had never seen anything dangerous aside from wolves and other carnivorous beasts, uttered gentle cries as they chased each other around. They were at ease, not scenting any predators on the air.

But then, one of them suddenly fell to its knees with a scream as a foothold trap ruthlessly snapped on its front leg, teeth sinking into its flesh and cracking the bone.

The antlerless little cervine let out a piteous cry of pain. It tried as hard as it could to pull free, but the trap's steel teeth only sank deeper into its flesh, already close to completely breaking the leg. Its struggling only served to make viscous blood spill onto the jade-green leaves around it.

The other Siberian musk deer that had been accompanying it ran away in a panic. But it wasn't long before it realized that no predators were chasing it, so it rushed back again, kneeling with its front legs and helplessly butting its head against its companion, trying to help it stand.

But the trapped musk deer had lost a leg, and was unable to stand, no matter how hard it tried. All it could do was lie there, tears spilling from its big dark eyes.

The remaining musk deer actually lay down as well, licking its companion and sharing its warmth with it. The two little creatures cried softly, entwining their necks, trembling as they leaned against each other. The scent of blood was too strong. It would definitely attract other predators before long. Yet still, they refused to part…

Night fell, and the three poachers checked the weather outside.

"Let's go see what we've caught. If there's nothing, then we'll head over to the rocks."

"Got it."

The three quickly crossed through the knee-high underbrush, splitting up to haul in the net.

Half an hour later, they regrouped again. The middle-aged man was empty-handed, but he produced a clear box from his backpack, inside of which was a beautifully-patterned, brightly colored snake with a head

shaped like a soldering iron. Even trapped in a box, it still bared its wide-open mouth at the men, writhing as if it wished to bite them.

The two young men's eyes were filled with gleeful surprise. "Gods! That's an amazing catch! How'd you get a thing like that on a rainy day like this, Uncle Tai? You're amazing!"

Uncle Tai quirked his lips upward. "The cliff over there has a snake nest in it. I saw it when I was laying traps earlier. There's nothing amazing about it—you'll learn soon enough if you stick with me for a few more trips."

"I wonder how much this is gonna sell for…" The young men muttered to themselves before pulling out their own gains.

Of the two sturdy young men, one had nothing to show. The other held up a beautiful, bloodstained white fox. The fox was about as large as a medium-sized dog, and though its pelt was dripping wet, you could see that after some cleaning up, it would definitely be silky to the touch.

The cold-faced youth furrowed his brow. "Lao-Er, where's your goods?"

Lao-Er scratched his head, grinning. "I caught a wolf cub, but I didn't wanna provoke something that can hold grudges like wolves do, so I strangled it to death and tossed it instead. Don't worry, I used chemicals to cover the scent."

Uncle Tai didn't speak, and the cold-faced youth huffed at him.

"Let's head for the cliff. We left a foothold trap over there. It'd be naïve of us to think we could catch a Siberian musk deer on our first day. We'll probably have to stay on this mountain for a few days."

Such was Uncle Tai's reckoning. But the three men froze in their tracks upon catching sight of the pair of musk deer in the darkness. Their greedy eyes widened, staring with matchless greed at the two small animals supporting each other with intertwined necks, as if these two lives had already turned into stacks of money piled before their eyes.

"Quiet!" Uncle Tai lowered his voice as he pulled back the excited younger men. "Lao-Er, the tranq darts!"

"Right!"

Taking care not to disturb their cash cows, Lao-Er dug up an iron box from his backpack and opened it to reveal tranquilizer darts meant to be shot through a blowgun.

The forest at night was gloomy and frightening, the trees so tall and imposing that only a few slivers of moonlight could break through, doing nothing but intensifying the scary atmosphere.

A metallic tube was aimed at the snuggling little creatures.

Crash!

The leaves behind the three men suddenly started rustling despite the lack of wind. They immediately turned to look behind them, on full alert.

Somehow, a man had managed to come stand behind them without anybody noticing. In the darkness of night, his long silver hair poured down like a waterfall, a few strands seeming to sparkle with light. His red ancient-style robe fluttered despite the lack of wind. His femininely handsome, uncanny face was extremely pale. Most terrifying of all, his irises were a horrifying bloodred and almost entirely filled his long and narrow eyes.

The red pattern on his forehead was as bright as snow. His overall appearance gave one the impression of a red-clothed demon, or a man-

eating yaoguai hidden in the deep mountains. This was only exacerbated by the fact that, when he saw the three men turn around, the corners of his lips slowly raised into a smile…

Three pairs of black pupils instantly shrank to pinpoints.

It was at this moment that Uncle Tai remembered what the old man told him: *This mountain of ours has a mountain god.*

A pair of thin hands covered their vision before they even had time to shout.

Crack, crack, crack.

Their bones made a snapping noise pleasing to the ear.

A red-and-black robe made of gorgeous material and covered in ancient decorative patterns brushed over the three men lying on the ground, passing through the weeds and shrubbery. Droplets of water hit the blazing outfit but failed entirely to soak into it, rolling off it to the ground.

The Siberian musk deer leapt up and ran away in fright, but didn't go far, staring at them with its wide black eyes.

The mountain god—also known as Wen Fengjin—squatted down by the injured musk deer. Small animals always had sharper senses than humans when it came to creatures more dangerous and fearsome than them. This little musk deer was no exception, and lay there obediently, trembling but not daring to struggle.

The steel was easily broken apart by a pair of delicate, fine-boned hands. Wen Fengjin cut open a palm to drip blood onto the creature's injured leg. Soon, the break quickly healed itself.

"Go."

He spoke in an indifferent tone, watched as the little creature stood and ran to its companion, then turned to walk over to the three men on the ground…

The next day, just as dawn began to break, the little temple halfway up the mountain opened its front door. The old man began to step out, then pulled his foot back again.

He looked at the three men lying there, who'd just been by the day before, and sighed. "Young brats just don't listen!"

The old man put his pipe to his mouth, sucking on it as he carried out a fire pan with practiced ease, lit it, then tossed something into the fire that caused it to emit a red smoke.

The villagers at the foot of the mountain started laughing when they saw that red smoke.

"It must've been those three with the backpacks who climbed up yesterday. I could tell they were shady just by the airs they were puttin' on! Those poaching bastards got caught by our mountain god!"

The other men laughed along with him. A few of them went to the county office to file a police report, while others headed up the mountain with the village headman to tie up the three men.

You could tell by their conversation that it was far from the first time this sort of thing had happened. Over a short few years, they'd already caught over a dozen poachers on this mountain range, gaining the attention of many. The mountain god's reputation had begun to spread among the locals and gain fame.

Within the mausoleum, the man who'd just rushed back was chilled from the outside air. He was expressionless, but moved extremely quickly

as he passed through the long tomb corridors within the grand and magnificent palace. Silver hair flew upward as he moved, and the expression on his face only softened when he reached a building on a small cliffside platform. Like the melting of an icy river, his inhuman eyes became infused with warmth, and a smile found its way to his lips.

There were chains as thick as a man's waist connecting this cliff to the platform in the center of the cavern, where the silently blazing red pining tree stood, just as it had for thousands of years.

Suddenly, a huge red lizard reared its head on the platform. Riding on the lizard's back was a soft and tiny child wearing a tiger cap.

"Diedie! You came back!"

The sight of Wen Fengjin put a joyous look in the child's grapelike, limpid eyes. It called out to him, its voice clearly that of a child whose teeth hadn't all grown in.

"Mn," Wen Fengjin answered dryly. He gracefully landed on the platform in a few leaps, then lifted the child in his arms, his expression even softer than before. "How is your mother doing today?"

The little girl said with a lisp, "Mother tol' me a stowwy!"

A story, hm… Wen Fengjin, carrying that very soft child who smelled like her mother's milk, walked over to the two-person casket.

There was someone lying on his side within the casket, his gentle and delicate cheek sunken into layers of fabric, his long crimson robe a loose mess around him, a black-and-red hair tie weighed down with tassels and Fish Pearls draped across the fabric. His long black hair wound around him. He was incredibly beautiful.

“Mother! I’m hungry!” The child looked at the man in the casket and called out to him in a babyish voice.

Wang Xiaomie’s mind was muddled from sleep. He dazedly sat up, reaching out to feel for the little girl without bothering to open his eyes, then pulled the little thing to his chest and lay back down again.

A low-voiced laugh sounded from above him, while an exhausted Mu Yi, who’d been babysitting all day, opened its mouth in a yawn.

Wen Fengjin sat on the edge of the casket and leaned over it. His chilly silver hair fell to cover both the figures within as a pair of pink lips pressed against the groggy Wang Xiaomie’s forehead.

The man’s presence came down like a blanket, but Wang Xiaomie only mumbled a few indistinct words in his sleep, refusing to wake up. The little girl covered her mouth with a giggle, and Wen Fengjin laughed as well, then placed repeated pecking kisses on Wang Xiaomie’s eyelids, gently catching long lashes between his lips.

After a short while, the sleeping figure finally woke from his dreams. Wang Xiaomie struggled to sit up with one arm around the child, lazily leaned back against the wall of the casket, and shot Wen Fengjin a glare.

“Don’t touch me in front of the child!” He put on a stern face. “You’re setting a bad example for our Goudan!”[11]

The second he said the name “Goudan,” the little girl, who’d been blinking and hiding her laughter just seconds ago, instantly lost her smile. She pouted as she gazed up at her venomous mother.

Wen Fengjin also fell silent for a few minutes before saying, “… She’s a girl.”

“You’re the one who gave her this name.” Wang Xiaomie mercilessly looked at his baby and said, “If you’re going to blame anyone, blame your dad. It’s your dad who said it first!”

The girl looked over at Wen Fengjin with a tearful look in her eyes.

Wen Fengjin, who’d accidentally given their adopted daughter this name two years ago, sat there under the child’s hurt gaze and his lover’s ruthless sneer for a moment, his face darkening, before choosing to… change the subject.

Their daughter, watching this happen, silently wished for a stepfather.

“…I received news from An Xie three days ago. The purple-haired jiangshi who was interred with him has now successfully changed into a red-haired one.”

“That’s fast. Didn’t he say last year that it’d take at least three or four years?”

Wang Xiaomie was somewhat taken aback. Six years had passed since everything they went through with Yi Yan. In those six years, they’d adopted a baby, and An Xie had returned to Mount Qi with his Little Purple-Fur to live out their days in peace, though he’d send them updates every once in a while.

As for Bai Yu…

In these past six years, he’d only received a single letter from Bai Yu, containing nothing but a single photograph.

In the photo, Bai Yu was smiling as he sat on a sofa in a brightly-lit room. A puppet that looked exactly like Xiao-An sat on his right, and a puppet that looked exactly like Yi Yan sat on his left.

One man and two puppets looked at the camera with cheerful expressions on their faces, as if they were the world’s happiest family.

Wang Xiaomie, upon receiving this picture, felt every hair on his body stand on end. He immediately made Wen Fengjin burn it.

Chapter 86:
A Room of Light

IT WAS SIX YEARS since they'd parted.

Bai Yu chose to turn the body of the person he most cared about into a puppet with human skin, to fabricate an ending that involved a happy family, and live the rest of his life in an eternal lie.

In the end, Bai Yu, who'd once had an energetic smile like any other youth, became a member of the fallen.

Meanwhile, Wang Xiaomie and Wen Fengjin took in an abandoned baby. At first, reduced to a shadow of himself due to the presence of this little brat who was constantly hungry, crying, and wetting the bed, the jealousy-prone Wen Fengjin coldly gave her the annoying, yet hilarious, name of "Goudan."

Because the baby was too small to live without his care, Wang Xiaomie's mind was almost entirely dedicated to her. That year, the slighted Wen Fengjin acted like a big zongzi gone berserk, not only beating up grave robbers in the mausoleum to work out his anger, but even going outside to beat up the poachers there. That was how he ended up saddled with the baffling title of "mountain god." Boss Wen now had a new job, after getting laid off from his old one as demon lord.

And then, in the second year, this little girl who was a little late with learning to speak called Wen Fengjin "Diedie."

It took only two syllables and three seconds for the demon lord of thousand-year legend to become an overprotective dad.

Wang Xiaomie sat beneath the pining tree, his ink-black hair falling over his shoulders to wind around his hands, and smiled as he watched Wen Fengjin lift their child one-armed to pick peach blossoms from the tree.

The wind that spiraled upward through the cavern sent the pining tree's branches rustling, causing petals like to fall like so many pink sparks of fire. Red robes and silver hair fluttered up, and the little girl giggled with laughter as she reached out to grab the floating flowers. A tiny one landed on big bloodred lizard Mu Yi's nose, causing it sneeze violently.

Wang Xiaomie leaned his head back and closed his eyes, allowing a petal he could not see to fall upon his eyelids.

Wen Fengjin just happened to turn his head in this direction and momentarily froze at the sight, after which his full lips turned upward. Carrying his daughter in one arm, he leaned down to pluck that single flower petal with slender fingers.

With a gentle tremble of lashes, bright black eyes and narrow inhuman ones met, reflecting that which they most treasured in each other's warm gazes.

There was no need for kisses, no need for tangled limbs, no need even for plaintively touching poetic verse. There was a warm, invisible something right there in this gentle shared look…

I once walked through years of darkness.

I once traveled an endless mountain road.

I once stopped for endless millennia beneath this pining tree.

It was not until you opened your eyes and looked at me, here, that I finally understood where my home was.

Eyes curved in a smile.

“I want to kiss you.”

“…Our daughter’s watching, you filthy hooligan.”

“She won’t be able to see us this way.”

Wen Fengjin lifted their daughter by the collar of her shirt, leaned over, and tilted his head to close his mouth over Wang Xiaomie’s lips. He caught the soft flesh of a lower lip between his own and slowly rubbed against it.

Wang Xiaomie blushed, his eyes blinking fast. Seen up close, there wasn’t a single flaw in his face. His half-closed eyes even showing a hint of teasing at the sight of Wen Fengjin’s assessing gaze. That pried-open mouth trembled for a moment, and Wang Xiaomie closed his eyes, red from his neck all the way up to his ears…

As for the child, who’d been in her diedie’s arms just a moment ago and now suddenly found herself being lifted by the collar to face the wall… Her current thoughts were, *Mom and Dad are so in love. I was just an accident, weehhhh.*

Mu Yi, meanwhile, lazily yawned again.

The next year, little Wen Mian had to start going to school.

Other children would cling to their parents’ clothes when they went to kindergarten, loudly wailing and refusing to go in. Lively and outgoing little Wen Mian, meanwhile, was an outlier. Her eyes lit up like lightbulbs at the sight of that schoolyard full of kids.

Wen Fengjin and Wang Xiaomie were just about to have her registered, the teacher’s pamphlet in hand, when they looked up to find that

their exuberant little girl had already slipped unnoticed into the kindergarten's playground, and was now laughing as she terrorized the other students with a soccer ball she'd stolen from a bunch of little boys.

Wen Fengjin and Wang Xiaomie were both speechless.

In that moment, Wang Xiaomie was certain that he was going to become a frequent visitor to the teacher's office in the future. *You little brat!*

In the fourth year, little comrade Wen Mian, who'd dominated the kindergarten and gone on to rule the rest of the elementary school, stood in front of all the parents and children at the parent-teacher conference to loudly read her short essay.

"The title of my essay is My Dad!"

The little girl turned to wave in Wang Xiaomie and Wen Fengjin's direction. The other parents all looked upon her with fond gazes. Wang Xiaomie felt a fatherly twinge at the thought that his daughter was all grown up, returning her wave with a smile…

…Only to hear his little girl continue with, "I have two dads!"

Wang Xiaomie went *"Urk!"* while Wen Fengjin was stunned silent.

Everyone else: "Hm?!"

The little girl: "We're a family of three. I have no mom, but I have two dads. When I was very little, I called Wen-baba 'Diedie,' and I called Daddy 'Mother,' but Daddy didn't like it, and insisted I call him Daddy. My Wen-baba loves my daddy a lot, and very coolly and handsomely teases Daddy every day. They're super lovey-dovey all the time, and they're very good to me too.

“But I’m worried too, because I discovered a huge secret! At nighttime, when I’m asleep, my Wen-baba often takes my daddy to a different room, and then he hits him! The way my daddy cries out is really terrible—even worse is that Wen-baba’s laughing when it happens! This is domestic violence—I’m sure it is—so I decided to write it in this essay and tell everyone about it!”

The look on Wen Mian’s face upon finishing her recitation was firm and steadfast, as if she were a little hero.

As for everyone else…

“Ohhhh…” The audience, as if realizing something, all turned a mix of derisive and astonished gazes on the handsome pair.

Wang Xiaomie buried his face in his hands, suffocating under the pressure.

Wen Fengjin was even worse, his face dark as coal and cold air emanating off him in waves.

And then little Wen Mian put one more metaphorical nail in the coffin. “Don’t be scared, Daddy! Just tell the truth, and I can get Laoshi to help you!”

Her young and inexperienced male teacher instantly blushed. “L-Laoshi can’t help with this.”

Faced with this scene, Wen Fengjin was moments away from exploding, while Wang Xiaomie thought, *Unfilial child! Traitor!*

From that moment onward, Wang Xiaomie and Wen Fengjin never went to another parent-teacher conference again.

Wang Xiaomie exclaimed, “I lost all face, my entire life’s worth, in that one day! There’s no way I’m going again!”

When An Xie—who’d moved to the surface as well, becoming their neighbor—heard this story, he nearly died (again) from laughter.

By his side was a man in a wheelchair, with a face as charming as a young girl’s and ear-length short hair, who softly smiled along with him. The sunlight illuminated a layer of near-invisible red fuzz covering all of his exposed skin, save for his face.

The way in which he looked at An Xie spoke of dependence. When he spoke, it was with an extremely shy tone—nothing at all like the treacherous emperor in An Xie’s story.

And in fact, he really wasn’t. Wang Xiaomie and Wen Fengjin knew that the person inside that body had probably changed a long time ago. It was likely An Xie knew this as well. After being betrayed by his lover, An Xie knew the person he’d loved was merely an illusion he’d dreamed up. He was ready and willing to place his affections in a jiangshi partner who both listened to him and was incapable of betraying him. He needed this shell. Who the person inside that shell might be didn’t really matter to him.

It was just…

Wang Xiaomie looked at An Xie’s brightly smiling face and quirked his lips at the genuine emotion he saw in the youth’s eyes.

Just as he thought. Even when all that remained was obsession, if that obsession became genuine, kind, and gentle—if that partner who loved and depended on him in turn became a reality—there was no one who could refuse such a longed-for happiness.

Though it was a mystery where the new An Chengjing's soul might have come from, it appeared he'd been around since the time he was Little Purple-Fur.

Wang Xiaomie and Wen Fengjin shared a look.

Those long and narrow eyes were cold, but stilled for a second upon meeting his gaze, after which the man gently winked his right eye.

Wang Xiaomie couldn't stop himself from laughing. After all that going around and around, and all the endless effort he'd expended, he'd finally realized his wish.

"Oh right—that girl, Wen Mian, is an average mortal, right?" An Xie suddenly asked, "You aren't planning on turning her into your kind?"

It was obvious what he meant to say, but Wang Xiaomie shook his head.

"She has her own life to live, and there's nothing wrong with living it as a normal person. Besides, there's no way for us to know whether the elixir of immortality really gave us eternal life or only extended our lifespans. Never aging or dying doesn't necessarily guarantee eternal happiness—it could just as easily mean eternal loneliness and pain. She's our daughter, but she's also herself. Fengjin and I will watch over her until her final moments…"

An Xie replied with a long, drawn-out hum of acknowledgment. "But won't you die of heartache when her life runs its course in a few decades?"

"There's no helping that." Wang Xiaomie blinked, having already steeled himself against that possibility a long time ago. "This is the price of longevity, and exactly the reason why I don't want her bearing that burden."

"Makes sense."

An Xie burst out in hearty laughter. But once the laughter ran out, he somewhat dejectedly rested his chin on one hand, his handsome face crumpling with a frown.

“I say… It feels kinda weird for the four of us—a demon lord, the demon lord’s shixiong, a general, an emperor—people who shook the annals of history back in our day, to end up living this kind of old-age retirement lifestyle. How about we do a little something? Start a new empire or something like that?” He continued, “Wen-qianbei, don’t tell me you don’t want to…”

Wen Fengjin replied with an icy voice, “I don’t.”

An Xie fell silent.

Wen Fengjin indifferently added, “My thousand years of adventure were simply because I wanted to be together with Shixiong.”

An Xie’s mouth twitched at that. “…Aren’t your aspirations a little too modest, Qianbei?”

Wen Fengjin sneered, “Being together with your Chengjing for eternity, or fighting on a never-ending battlefield. Which do you choose?”

After a moment of silence, An Xie decisively replied, “I choose the eternity.”

Wen Fengjin smiled coldly.

From where he was sitting next to Wang Xiaomie, Chengjing also shook his head with a smile

Wang Xiaomie turned to him and said, “What do you want to eat tonight? I’m cooking.”

Chengjing warmly replied, “You don’t need to go to the trouble.”

Wang Xiaomie shrugged. “It’s no trouble at all.”

He stood up and headed to the kitchen, while Wen Fengjin, noticing the time, headed out to pick up Wen Mian. In the living room, Chengjing gently leaned against An Xie’s shoulder…

The day gradually turned to dusk.

Wen Fengjin returned with their young daughter, who brought laughter to everyone at the table with her tales of what happened at school that day. The lights were bright in the dark night. With such a comfortingly warm room as this, anyone would have a hard time leaving.

This was all a person could ever want in a lifetime…

[FIN]

Chapter 87:
Alone

THE BORDER.

Torches burned on the city walls, their tiny bit of warmth unable to penetrate the soldiers' ice-cold armor in the severe winter chill. The red flags hanging over the city flapped audibly in the cold wind.

Before the hot breath these soldiers exhaled had time to become individual puffs of fog, knife-sharp cold air swooped in to pierce their chests. Their hands were all wrapped in either leather or cloth, each wielding a long spear as they gazed motionlessly into the pitch-black darkness ahead. Shards of ice hung from their faces and eyelashes, which were a few degrees colder than even the ice.

In weather like this, shifts changed relatively often, as otherwise, it was possible they'd freeze to death out here.

Among them was one man in golden armor rather more magnificent than the rest, with animal pelts wrapped around the seams at the sides. He looked no more than seventeen or eighteen years old, and his features were sweet and delicate when contrasted with this bunch of rough older men, but the scimitar at his waist was deadlier than any of the men here.

The clatter of armor sounded from behind him, and he turned around to look. When he saw who approached, a smile bloomed on his stiffly frozen face, and his eyes softened as well.

This person, also dressed in golden armor, moved with very long strides. He carried himself with an impressive bearing, his handsome face

displaying a bright and open smile. When he was close enough, he threw an arm around the scimitar-wielding young deputy general's neck and pulled him energetically toward himself. The young deputy general didn't resist, stumbling a bit before pressing against him with a laugh and placing a hand lightly against his waist. "Why haven't you gone to bed yet, A-Jin? It's freezing out here."

The newcomer smiled, patting the deputy general named A-Jin on the butt in the joking manner you might expect of a rough-mannered man.

Within the darkness, Dai Jin's eyes reddened at the corners. He didn't straighten up, simply allowing that hand to slap his buttocks as he said, in a meek and quiet tone, "This camp suddenly reported an emergency just as the new emperor ascended the throne, but our soldiers on the inside received no news. Something feels off about the situation, so I was standing here, thinking it over."

"Hm?" The young general laughed softly, giving him a ridiculing yet appreciative glance. "You've got a good head on your shoulders, and it's definitely worth pondering, but you needn't worry too much. I've never been afraid of them. If it's a fight they want then it's a fight they'll get."

At the sight of the fighting spirit and fearlessness in the young general's eyes, an infatuated A-Jin said, "Master…"

This word reached the other man's ears, despite how lightly it had been spoken. He let go of A-Jin, curling one large hand into a fist and gently hammering it against A-Jin's chest plate. "What're you calling me Master for? You've been my deputy general this long, and still keep calling me Master this and Master that! If your men heard you, you'd lose all your prestige!"

A-Jin blinked to cover up his feelings, replying, “If my men won’t listen, I’ll just beat them up. Master will always be Master. I followed you from the manor. As far as I’m concerned, no other position is more important to me than that.”

“Ha ha, oh you.”

The young general just happened to be An Xie. He exasperatedly shook his head as he said, “You’re such a blockhead. It puts that handsome face of yours to waste.”

A-Jin didn’t reply, quirking his lips in a somewhat bashful smile.

The chill wind blew in again, causing An Xie to curse from the cold and start heading back, his deputy general in tow. A few steps later, he caught sight of a few scattered people laughing at them from the city street below, at which point he belatedly remembered that his deputy general was a grown man. Would he feel embarrassed and angry about being led around by the hand like they’d done as children?

But when he looked behind him, he saw the same A-Jin who’d been following him since childhood, obediently gazing at him with his face wreathed in smiles. Those always-calm eyes contained something that disappeared the instant An Xie looked back.

Dazed, An Xie let go of his hand. And so, he and A-Jin began walking side by side instead.

Returning to the base, the two frostbitten men entered a room with a burning fire pan. The moment the chill receded, An Xie and A-Jin both simultaneously shivered.

“Shit, this weather’s awful!”

An Xie started tugging off his armor, but his stiff fingers weren't quite working like they should. A-Jin hurriedly walked over and used his own equally stiff fingers to deftly remove his armor for him.

The orange light of a blazing lantern illuminated A-Jin's lowered gaze and smooth forehead, his long lashes casting a shadow over his features. In this moment, he looked sweet and affectionate.

An Xie was dumbstruck.

His armor was all removed and hung up on the nearby rack, after which A-Jin came back to help remove his fur chest protector and inner robe.

"I can do this part myself!" An Xie forced a couple of laughs and made to take off his clothes. But when he lowered his head, something soft suddenly pressed against his lips. The smile instantly disappeared from his face as he stared expressionlessly at A-Jin, who was absorbed in kissing him.

A-Jin's eyes were half closed, his lashes trembling as he gently and carefully ground his lips against An Xie's. Though he looked pretty and delicate, A-Jin was still a soldier. His lips were dry, and chapped in some places, unlike those of the person An Xie had kissed back in the palace.

The lantern flame swayed.

After kissing An Xie for a good while without ever being able to pry open his tightly shut mouth, A-Jin closed his eyes and took a step back. Tears rolled down his ice-cold cheeks.

An Xie simply watched him, still expressionless, and not swayed in the slightest.

“Why can’t you accept me…? I don’t need anything. That man won’t let you near him, but I’m willing to give you everything he won’t… Whatever you want to do, I’ll submit without question. Why is it that A-Jing is okay, but A-Jin isn’t?”

A-Jin spoke quietly, rather than kicking up a fuss. He remained standing weakly in front of An Xie, still crying as he looked at him.

They both knew that names had nothing to do with it.

“My heart is with him.”

A-Jin took his own armor and clothes off one piece at a time, placing upon the table that scimitar that had drunk the blood of countless enemies. Once everything that covered and protected him was gone, he was bereft of any disguise, standing softly before the person with whom he was so infatuated.

He looked at An Xie.

“I know I can’t have your heart, but you’re old enough now that it’s not good for you to keep holding back. And I’m willing…” A-Jin tugged his lips into a smile. He bent over the table, legs spread wide, and gazed back at An Xie.

But An Xie shut his eyes at the sight of the miserable figure before him. He sighed, pulled over a blanket to wrap him in, and tossed him onto the bed.

The candle was blown out, An Xie climbed onto the wooden bed, and in the darkness, A-Jin, panting as if he were poisoned, frantically latched onto him…

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How low could one be brought by love?

Dai Jin was a servant in the Duke of Qing's household from the day he was born. Both his parents were servants there, which naturally made him one as well. When it was discovered that he had an aptitude for martial arts, he got to train with the other children. He was skilled, learned quickly, and even if he broke his hand, could tap into the strength of his anger to hit back. He held no particular fear of killing people, and he was good-looking, so he was chosen to be the bodyguard and shield for the family's only son, Young Master An Xie.

This wasn't his first meeting with An Xie. He'd grown up alongside him and had always liked this future master of the household. So much so, in fact, that he was beside himself with infatuation. There was no particular reason for his feelings, nor a special story behind them. They were not spectacular. He was a leaf sinking into a lake, being silently swallowed by those feelings.

Even common folk could have large harems, never mind rich families of merit. A-Jin had no particularly wild hopes for their relationship; he and An Xie were far too different in social status, and in the current era, even the empress couldn't hope to be her husband's one and only during their lifetime. He only hoped that he could one day become one of An Xie's concubines. Even just an unimportant one, who never appeared in public. A veiled sweetness, a short-lived moment as loving husband and wife, would be enough. He longed for An Xie to embrace him, even if it was just a joking shove. Even if it hurt, it didn't matter.

But later, he realized he was wrong. An Xie's personality would never allow him to gather a harem of concubines.

An Xie was incredibly obstinate when it came to his affections. Whomever he fell in love with would surely be very happy, because no matter what their whims, An Xie would always allow it. Even if they wished for them to be a single couple for their entire lives, even if their statuses were unequal, even if the other person was a man… As long as he loved them, An Xie would do anything for that person.

How nice… Too bad the one he loves isn't me.

A-Jin held a love letter from An Xie to Third Prince An Chengjing, silently playing the role of one of the birds that built the magpie bridge, allowing the cowherd and the weaver girl to meet.

A servant could not stand in his master's way. And so, he didn't resent An Xie. A commoner could not be so bold as to resent a sovereign of the land. And so, he could not resent the third prince.

A-Jin endured this suffering and torment for a few years, even when it drove him to start using a knife to cut marks into his arm. He cut whenever he felt hate, cut whenever he was sad, and cut when he couldn't bear to live anymore. Bloody wounds stretched from his wrists to his shoulders, from his left hand to his right.

One year, he and the third prince's secret guards were keeping watch in the shadows, making sure not a single person came to this remote patch of garden within the imperial palace—because behind them, the third prince and An Xie had just rolled into the flowers together.

A-Jin had very good hearing. He could hear the third prince crying in a thin voice, sounding sticky and delicate, while An Xie's laughter was

husky yet gentle. He became a stone in that moment, silently squatting there in that dark corner, able to do nothing but listen.

When they left, An Xie's face was wreathed in smiles. He chattered away the entire way back, and A-Jin responded to him with a smile of his own.

But during a break the next day, he went to a place where men could amuse themselves with other men. He spent a huge chunk of his savings to find a man, not caring about what was below, but what was above…

The huge amount of taels he paid had the prostitute beaming with joy as he went to call for the person A-Jin wanted.

In a room filled with an overwhelming fragrance, a table was quickly set with all sorts of exquisite snacks and dishes. A-Jin lifted up the wine jar placed there and started drinking straight from the bottle. These jars tended to have a little something extra added to them, to ensure that those customers who lacked stamina could manage to enjoy themselves to the full, while also ensuring prostitutes didn't slack off if a customer was too ugly.

Once he drank it all down, his body started to heat up.

A-Jin sat on the bed, watching as the door was opened and a smiling man who looked close enough to pass, but was robustly built, stepped into the room. Looking at this man, he said in a lukewarm voice, "There's no need for introductions. I don't need to know who you are, and I don't need any niceties, either. All you need to do is shut your mouth and do what you came to do."

The man's smile awkwardly froze on his face. Then he tactfully shut his mouth with a nod, strode directly over, and started to strip A-Jin of his

clothes.

A-Jin simply sat there, watching the man as he moved.

He closed his eyes, feeling those fingers against his skin and pretending that they were An Xie’s hands.

He was pushed down into the bedding, the softly scented material brushing against his skin as large hands wandered across his form. The drug was taking effect. Something was smeared across his body as well, after which “An Xie” turned him over so that he was facing downward.

A-Jin tightly gripped the blanket, tears spilling from his just as tightly shut eyes to leave wet marks on the blanket below.

“An Xie…”

I’m not afraid of pain. I’m not afraid of pain. I’m not afraid of torment or injury. What I fear is that no one’s heart will hurt for me.

Black hair came down to tangle with his own.

The door was thrown open.

A cold gust blew over him, causing A-Jin to shudder. He heard a man scream as shrilly as a woman, and the person on his back grunted in pain. A-Jin then opened his eyes to see a furious expression on a face he’d been yearning for day and night.

“An Xie…”

He had only enough time to say this in a daze before he was punched in the face. In his towering anger An Xie held nothing back from the blow. Blood immediately spilled from A-Jin’s nose as An Xie climbed on top of him, tugged his hair, and punched him a few more times.

There were people calling for help, or coming over to tug at An Xie—but when An Xie turned to look at them, the nobility, majesty, and fury he exuded caused the male brothel's hired thugs to lose their nerve.

Someone also recognized An Xie, at which point they were even less willing to step in. This was the Duke of Qing's only heir, a future aristocrat of royal blood, one who'd made himself into a little general on the battlefield, at that. Who would dare stop such a man?

And so A-Jin was beaten black and blue by An Xie, not a single inch of his face spared from the bruising. An Xie picked up the clothes on the ground and threw them at A-Jin, saying in an icy voice, "Get dressed!"

He then chased everyone out of the room with a stormy look on his face, and shut the door.

A-Jin laughed, despite having just been beaten. He smiled through his swollen face as he put on his clothes, then finally went home with An Xie.

They walked down a street lit by waning lamps. A-Jin quietly said to the man in front of him, "You may stop me today, but I'll go again tomorrow."

The man before him paused, but didn't turn around. "Then I'll beat you to death!"

"Why do you want to beat me to death?" asked A-Jin.

"Why do you want to go to a place like that and humiliate yourself?!" An Xie asked in return.

"Because I'm jealous… I want you to embrace me the way you do the third prince, but since I can't have that, I went to find an imposter," A-Jin replied with a soft laugh.

An Xie stopped walking entirely, turning to reveal astonishment written all over his face. This sight made A-Jin happy, in a way. He couldn't resist telling him everything he'd felt and done over these many years. As he vented his anger, he laughed carelessly, face so swollen that it looked like a pig's, giving him the air of a certified madman.

At the end of his rant, he slowed down, and said, sounding refreshed, "…Did you know, I lick the cups you've used, eat your leftover food, and sneak into your room when you're out to lie on the bed and smell the scent left on it… Does that disgust you?"

A-Jin slit open his feelings one by one with a knife, holding the bloody offerings up for An Xie to see. Though he was smiling, he'd have been better off crying instead.

An Xie calmed down. His expression held a hint of compassion and remorse, and he was clearly at a loss for what to do. He opened his mouth, but couldn't say a single word. In the end, his calloused hand took hold of an equally calloused one, after which he turned and ran back to the manor, heading straight back to his room.

This action left A-Jin dumbstruck. Given An Xie's personality, he wouldn't have been surprised if the man had chosen to kill him.

Upon returning to the room, An Xie pointed at the door and said, "I don't believe a single word you said, so let's just pretend we never had this conversation. A-Jin, go back!"

He cares about me…

A-Jin saw a truth in An Xie's eyes. An Xie didn't want to lose the brother and friend who'd been with him since childhood. He did care…

As he realized this, A-Jin's eyes suddenly lit up, and he threw himself at a stupefied An Xie. The two rolled a few times across the bed, fists falling like rain as they tussled with each other.

"Have you gone insane?!" An Xie roared.

A-Jin's normally quiet and well-behaved manner had transformed. He endured the fists as he tore at An Xie's clothes, roaring back, "Go ahead and hit me! Beat me to death! Keep howling! Let everyone in the manor know that I've done you the greatest disrespect and then have the old master kill me with a swing of his sword!"

An Xie was stunned silent.

The lack of an answer only served to make A-Jin's eyes even brighter, and he lowered his head in an attempt to kiss him.

But not speaking didn't mean that An Xie couldn't hit him. They switched positions so An Xie was now on top, his eyes blazing with fury and his fists pummeling him mercilessly. A-Jin couldn't beat him, nor did he try to resist. All he did was writhe back and forth, letting the blows rain down as he fondled away.

When his hand grasped hold of a certain something, An Xie's face immediately turned livid. He started laughing from anger, and wrapped his hands around A-Jin's throat. "You want to die? Fine! I'll goddamn kill you today!" He began tightening his grip.

A-Jin's hideous, wound-ridden face turned red from lack of air, but he still squeezed out the words, "If you…don't kill me today…I'll make sure I sleep with you tonight!"

An Xie was absolutely speechless. This idiot absolutely refused to see sense!

They were only seventeen or eighteen, but that was considered an adult in antiquity. And so, this pair of grown men tussled together without the slightest dignity. The two of them fought and fought, wriggled and writhed.

And then, that jar of wine A-Jin drank finally took full effect.

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The day after that, An Xie sat by his bed, gritting his teeth as he looked at the dimwit sleeping therein.

A-Jin had a high fever. If it weren't for the brown medicinal soups being forcefully poured down his throat, he'd have nearly died for real. An Xie's angry, murderous feelings disappeared at the sight of his suffering figure.

When A-Jin woke up later, he'd gripped his hand and weakly asked, "Master, is it possible that you've never done it with the third prince before…?"

An Xie clenched his jaw, refusing to answer that question, but A-Jin understood everything from his silence. He started crying as he lay there in bed, which nearly scared An Xie to death.

"*Now* what is it?!" An Xie twisted his head around, about to call someone to get the doctor.

But A-Jin tearfully said, "No wonder…your skills are atrocious…"

An Xie could say nothing to that.

A-Jin cried and cried, then started to laugh, his tear-filled black eyes sparkling as they gazed in An Xie's direction.

"Are you laughing at me?!" An Xie's hands were shaking. "…It looks like you really do want me to beat you to death with my bare hands!"

"I'm not laughing at you… I'm just so glad… I'm so glad…" A-Jin's cheeks were bright red from the fever. He struggled to breathe, lifting claws hot as a charcoal fire and cupping An Xie's cheeks. "I'm so glad… I'm your first."

An Xie stayed silent. The hands on his cheeks were very, very hot, and so was A-Jin's gaze. He turned his head, refusing to look at him.

"Are you feeling remorse? Toward the third prince?" A-Jin pulled back his hands, quietly saying, "The third prince clearly has other plans for you. And he's always leading you on, too. Can you really not see it?"

An Xie didn't reply. The truth was that, over the years, he'd long since had an inkling of that fact.

A-Jin continued, "Are you really going to put him on the throne? The third prince truly isn't any sort of righteous ruler."

An Xie stood up without a reply and silently made to leave…

…Only for A-Jin to call out to him from behind: "Since I was a child, you've been my master, and also the person I love the most. No matter what time it is, no matter what choice you make, I'll always follow you without the slightest regret!"

An Xie turned his head slightly to look at him, before twisting back around and leaving.

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In the present, General An had returned from the border, using the military power at his disposal and his family's influence to push the third prince onto the throne without the slightest hesitation. It was also this year that he learned what Third Prince An Chengjing had been hiding from him, and the year in which the border asked for emergency assistance.

An Xie cast a glance at the person on the throne, then expressionlessly headed for that trap-filled battlefield.

And A-Jin stayed by An Xie's side the entire way.

All the way until that incident occurred…

Chapter 88:
If I Could Give

OUTSIDE WAS THE COLD, dry borderland, where, in severe winters, you could freeze down to your toes even when dressed in quilted jackets and sheepskins. A fire pan blazed within the room, but coming out from under the covers could still leave a man shrinking with cold.

An Xie sat on the side of the bed, naked from the waist up, revealing a strong body covered in unevenly scattered scars—long ones and short ones, all faded, all across his young form. The muscles of his chest and lower belly were visibly solid, and his shoulder blades stood out prominently on his back. Besides an old scar from a sword wound, that back was also speckled with countless new cuts, though none of them were deep. Seen from the right angle, they looked like they'd been made by someone's fingers, scratching with their nails in a moment of uncontrollable passion.

And in truth, that was exactly what they were.

There was a somber look on An Xie's handsome face, and a piece of jerky between his teeth. He wasn't eating it, merely holding it in place, his back to the bed, thinking about who-knew-what.

The scratches on his body were nothing worth mentioning to him. It always went like this whenever he and A-Jin did it. A-Jin would go wild, so wild it was as if he was going to die. An Xie wanted to go a little gentler, and would always get angry at the commotion he made, always ending up with blood all over the bed. It was only once A-Jin was too exhausted to make any more trouble that he'd finally behave.

To tell the truth, he couldn’t tell what exactly it was that A-Jin wanted. In An Xie’s eyes, A-Jin had long been his brother, not his servant. One who’d followed him since they were young. When he got in trouble, A-Jin would shoulder the blame; when he got in a fight, A-Jin would charge to the fore; and when a disobedient An Xie was scolded by the teacher in school, A-Jin would stand up along with him.

The teacher had once asked him why he’d stood up. A-Jin replied, “He is my master, and the master’s disgrace is the servant’s death. If you condemn my master, I cannot simply stand by, no matter who you may be.”

From that moment on, the teacher who’d come to tutor An Xie would praise A-Jin for his loyalty. In those days, loyalty was considered more valuable even than humanity. When An Xie’s grandfather heard of the incident, he burned A-Jin’s indenture contract, along with that of his parents. “From this day forward, you are no longer a servant. You are his right-hand man, understand?”

A-Jin kowtowed, and from then on, he treated An Xie even better than before.

Envious people would sourly say, “Young Master An has a good dog.” People on more friendly terms would offer praise. “That little An Xie’s already got a follower at his age. As expected of the progeny of a duke!”

In all this chatter, the focus of their conversation was still An Xie. Nobody cared about a commoner. In the eyes of the nobility, commoners were the lowest of the low, ranking even lower than the family dog. A dirty commoner doing anything for the nobility was only as it should be. Even A-Jin thought this way.

But An Xie didn’t. He said to A-Jin, “You’re my brother, and more worthy of my trust than any of my friends among those rich aristocrats.”

He was only speaking the truth. But A-Jin misunderstood his heartfelt friendship.

When An Xie first started accepting A-Jin’s advances, it was because he couldn’t bear to see him like this. Seeing A-Jin with that swollen face, speaking of his own feelings as though they weren’t worth a single coin, and even forcing a smile as he did so… It made An Xie’s heart ache more than anything. That was his own brother. He didn’t want to let A-Jin walk down a dead-end road.

In that era, feelings were an extremely heavy thing. It was no joke when A-Jin said he’d kill himself. No one would dare joke about a thing like that. Countless men and women had thrown themselves into the river or hanged themselves in a fit of passion, and besides, An Xie knew perfectly well that A-Jin was the type who would really do it. Particularly when A-Jin said he’d felt this way for a long time, and when, during their tussle, he caught sight of the wounds on A-Jin’s arms.

An Xie was reminded of his infatuation with the third prince…and of the deception he’d gradually become aware of over time.

And so, An Xie’s heart softened.

He embraced A-Jin. He gave what remaining warmth and emotion he had left to the dying fish that was A-Jin.

Other children of old families and noble friends who played together would be married at twelve or thirteen, and would already have a great many children by seventeen or eighteen. But An Xie had been saving himself for the third prince all this time. He was an earnest man, willing to

bear any hardship to save himself for his beloved, so that he could offer his best self to the person whom he loved more than anyone. He'd give that person happiness and satisfaction.

He was very stubborn. So much so that once his mind was set, nothing could change it. Even if he was met with a brick wall, he'd insist on ramming into it head-on! But as he tried countless times to get close to him, Third Prince Chengjing's visible evasion and rejections irritated An Xie. And so, in the powerless way in which A-Jin crumbled, looking as if he'd never be able to obtain that which he wanted, An Xie saw himself.

Once there was a first time, there was bound to be a second. He embraced A-Jin many times.

Sometimes, An Xie felt like he was a damn beast. He wanted to be with Chengjing, and when he couldn't get him, he'd go looking for A-Jin instead. How did this make him any different from a beast?

He'd read the same lovey-dovey books as everyone else, face red, back when he was still young. Those books said that when you were with the person you liked, even a single glance could made you feel like you were walking on clouds, weightless as the immortals in heaven… But when he was with Chengjing, there was nothing but prudence and the silence that came from being pushed away. Whereas when he was with A-Jin, the other man could always make him angry, then give him release from that anger.

A-Jin was doing it on purpose. He had his own little ideas. An Xie knew this, but he still felt a sense of warmth at the thought.

If only it'd been A-Jin from the start…

Snapping the jerky apart between his teeth, An Xie suppressed this thought the moment it popped into his head. There was a dark look in his

eyes as he kept on chewing.

The blanket behind him rose into a large lump, which moved slightly. After a moment, an arm covered in rows of scars reached out from within the blanket to wrap around An Xie's waist.

A hot cheek rubbed against skin as A-Jin kissed An Xie's back, black hair spreading messily across both the bed and his face. The blanket slipped down slightly, revealing smooth and skinny shoulders.

With his waist covered in saliva, An Xie turned to shoot A-Jin a look. He reached over and tugged the blanket up to cover A-Jin's shoulders again. "Are you a dog or something? Go find a bone to grind your teeth on."

A-Jin quietly laughed.

"Take a feel for yourself and see if your backside's torn. You always go so wild every time, getting blood all over my bed. The servants who wash our clothes probably think their general's a woman in a man's guise who just started menstruating!" An Xie said with a frown.

A-Jin was still quietly laughing, and didn't reply.

"I put ointment on you…" An Xie paused a moment, then continued, "This is the last time."

He didn't say what was the last time, but even a fool could understand what he meant. A-Jin stopped laughing. He raised his head in a daze, his eyelids so swollen they looked like walnuts, at the sight of which An Xie reached over with a rough-skinned hand to rub them for him. A-Jin's eyelids were particularly prone to swelling. If he didn't sleep well, or drank too much water, or cried the day before, his eyes could be as swollen as if they'd been stung by bees.

"Why…" A-Jin asked with a trembling voice.

An Xie chewed up the jerky and swallowed it, his expression indifferent. “I’ve been thinking. I was already hurt by Chengjing, and I don’t want you to end up like me. I’m stubborn. I refuse to give up, but I don’t know how much longer I can last. I’m going to squander my life on him, but I can’t have that set back your life as well. You can still start a family and a career, or find someone respectable whom you can beat in a fight, so if he betrays you, you can beat him up. If you go for me, there’s no way you can beat me, even if I’ve betrayed you.”

“If you can beat me, then go ahead and butcher me. And afterward, I’ll be buried together with you.” A-Jin’s lips were trembling as he fiercely tightened his grip around An Xie’s waist, burying his face in that scar-riddled skin.

An Xie turned his head away again to gaze at the fire pan, then lowered his eyes, saying, “I’m not a good guy—I’m unpredictable and greedy.”

“An Xie, don’t talk that way about yourself, please…”

A-Jin was crying. An Xie felt as if he’d just had red-hot molten iron poured over his heart.

“Today was the last time. I’m serious. I’ll go get you some food in a moment. And once you’ve eaten, you don’t need to go to the front today. Take a rest day. Don’t come here again in the future.”

Having said all this, An Xie stood up to leave.

A-Jin kept holding onto him, roaring, “No! I refuse! Just because you’re stubborn, do you think I can’t be?! I don’t want anything… I don’t want anything! Isn’t that enough?!”

“You may not want it, but I should give it.” An Xie pointed at himself as he said, “I’m a man, and since I’ve goddamn bedded you, I ought to give you everything that comes with that. But I goddamn can’t, do you understand?!”

In An Xie’s mind, he was more unhappy and put-upon than anyone else. He’d been fixated on the third prince An Chengjing since he was a little brat, but what he ought to do was treat A-Jin right.

But he wasn’t worthy. He had someone else in his heart, and so didn’t deserve A-Jin. Even if he broke off his desire for Third Prince Chengjing, An Xie was afraid his heart would still soften and sway if Chengjing ever yielded to him one day. And so, he believed he was unworthy.

One’s feelings should be clean, clear-cut, and wholly entrusted to the hands of the person you liked. A-Jin needed someone who could treasure him with all his heart. Not a “second marriage” guy like him.

This man was stubborn beyond belief. A-Jin knew this better than anyone. “I can never win out over him…” His eyes were bloodshot, his voice hoarse as he asked An Xie, “Can’t you just give up on that hypocrite An Chengjing?! Now that he’s become emperor, there’s no way he’ll ever come looking for you again! An Xie, you obstinate blockhead!”

It’s not that you can’t win an argument… An Xie silently thought to himself. *If I’m going to break it off, I’ve got to make it a clear and straightforward break.*

So he tore A-Jin off of him, then pulled his clothes from the nearby rack, carelessly dressing himself in that deathly cold weather, then brushing open the thick door curtain and leaving the room.

A-Jin sat wrapped in the blanket, gripping it so tightly that he tore holes into the fabric. “Bastard! An Xie, you absolute *bastaaard*!”

The “bastard” in the doorway listened to the voice inside, his face freezing cold. Some passing servants caught sight of the general’s face and nearly wet themselves in fright, quickly turning to leave at a look from An Xie.

He’d thought A-Jin would be depressed for a couple of days after all that. But to his surprise, what A-Jin did instead was pick a fight with him.

It was day at the border military camp, and a few high-ranking officers sat around a low table, exchanging glances with each other. They were watching their generalissimo and deputy general verbally attack each other. Or to put it more accurately, it was Deputy General Dai Jin one-sidedly calling out the generalissimo, while Generalissimo An, who would normally drag you outside for a one-on-one duel at the slightest disagreement, was now acting like his mouth had been clamped shut—not saying a word, not even reacting to the frosty looks he was getting. He simply sat there, letting the deputy general scold away…

Everyone present felt pity at the sight.

They knew that Generalissimo An and Deputy General Dai Jin were good brothers, and so none of them could bring themselves to interrupt, for fear that they would get on both men’s bad sides at once.

“There’s mountains on both sides here, so a surprise attack is a good idea. But nobody can guarantee there won’t be an ambush when we pass through here. Also, while there were enemy troops haunting this area before, there hasn’t been any news of late. How do we know we’ll run into

them if we send troops there? Who can guarantee that they're definitely camped on that mountain?"

A-Jin was dressed in full armor, one hand on the handle of the scimitar at his side, the other pointing at the map hanging on a stand. He indicated a few points with an armored finger before he turned to look at the silent An Xie.

"These three areas are all places where it's easy to get counter-attacked. If our information is genuine, then we should be able to get the drop on them. We still have yet to receive reinforcements, and there are only twenty or thirty thousand men stationed in the city, with ten thousand of those meant to defend the city itself. The enemy outnumbers us two to one. It's all well and good if our sneak attack succeeds, but if it fails, then we'll be easy prey delivered to their doorstep! Do you not understand this, An Xie? Do you not have a brain in that head of yours?!"

The more A-Jin spoke the angrier he became, until finally, he even directly disrespected An Xie by using his full name. The other officers awkwardly looked away, pretending they hadn't heard.

An Xie replied, in a low voice, "This is the intelligence we received. The emperor ordered me to lead the men in a sneak attack, on pain of death."

A-Jin flared up at that, his pretty, delicate face becoming sharp enough to cut. "His Majesty sits high above us on his lofty throne. Do you really think he's more well-informed than our men who live year-round here at the border?! How is he so sure that the enemy is stationed there? And to give an order insisting that you take men there on pain of death… He doesn't know a damn thing!"

When these words left his mouth, everyone in the room was shocked. An Xie grew especially pale, roaring, “Shut up! Dai Jin, that’s our current emperor you’re talking about! Are you looking to get beheaded?!”

A-Jin panted noisily for breath as he replied, “Did I say something goddamn wrong? He clearly has bad intentions! He won’t send us troops, and he keeps goddamn delaying provisions and refusing to send them! Now he even wants you to take what few men we have to a place this dangerous! He wants you to die! That son of a bitch emperor is planning to boil his dog now that the rabbits are dead—”

Slap—

Chapter 89:
A Kind of Sorrow

AN XIE STOOD UP and whipped his hand across A-Jin's face with enough force to turn it aside, A-Jin's entire body tilting so far that he nearly fell to the floor. That armored hand left a scarlet mark on his face, droplets of blood leaking from the corner of his mouth.

Everyone lowered their heads in dumbstruck horror. To insult the emperor could lose you your head, even in this remote area far from any authorities. If word got out, that would be more than enough for Dai Jin to be executed many times over—and An Xie would be punished along with him. In the worst outcome, he might even be left crippled and stuck with the reputation of having disrespected the emperor. If An Xie dragged Dai Jin outside and had him flogged a few dozen times, it would be considered a relatively light punishment. Everyone waited for the generalissimo to administer punishment to Dai Jin.

But to their surprise, all An Xie did was curse, "Fuck off back to your room!" Nothing else.

Dai Jin bit his cheek hard enough to visibly tense the skin, cupped his fist in a proper salute to An Xie, then angrily strode out.

An Xie was livid with anger as he sat in his chair, and roared at the remaining group, "If word of this conversation gets out, I'll skin you all alive, got it?!"

"Yes, sir!" the officers all hurriedly and uniformly roared in reply.

“All right. Military Advisor, give us our upcoming schedule,” An Xie said.

The aging advisor stood up with a smile and began to speak.

The officers all widened their eyes in astonishment. *That’s it? You’re not even going to beat him?!*

An Xie glared back at them. *Like hell I am!*

The officers stayed silent. Compared to Deputy General Dai Jin, these guys—who got a beating if they so much as moved—were like unloved stepchildren. The thought made them want to cry.

So this matter was left unsettled.

Knowing that A-Jin was getting particularly worked up over this situation, so much so that he’d probably be too angry to even eat dinner that night, An Xie carried some food over to A-Jin’s room. He knocked on the door, only to discover that it was unlocked.

…Since the door had been left open, did it mean the person inside was waiting for him to comfort him or something?

An Xie walked in with a feeling of exasperation and found A-Jin lying in bed with only his head poking out from the covers. Placing the food on the table, he picked up a baozi, sat down by the bed, and started gnawing away at it. He’d specially ordered these baozi from the kitchen; the meat was freshly supplied mutton from the city, and the head cook’s skill was unimpeachable. The buns had thin skin and a whole lot of filling, juices running with each hot, steamy bite. The mutton was delicious enough to make anyone’s mouth water.

An Xie neither spoke to nor tried to cajole the person in the bed. He simply sat by the bedside, chowing down on his baozi, sounding like he was

enjoying it more than anything.

A few minutes later, A-Jin stuck out a leg and kicked this bastard to the floor.

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The sun set, the servants brought in a new fire pan, and the candles were lit.

An Xie and A-Jin took their shoes off side by side, then sat cross-legged on the edge of the bed and chewed on baozi.

The two talked as they ate.

A-Jin said, “You’re not really an idiot, so there’s no way you don’t understand what I mean. You know better than I do that he has nothing good in store for you. So why do you insist on leading the troops there?”

An Xie gave a lukewarm grunt of agreement before answering, “I know this situation’s fishier than a seaside market, but this is his land, and I don’t necessarily think he’d sacrifice tens of thousands of soldiers and his own border just to kill me. Him wanting to kill me is only a theory on our part, just half a chance, which isn’t a threat. Being able to defeat our enemies is the other half of that chance, so I’m going.”

A-Jin said, “And what if he wants nothing more than for you to die?”

An Xie paused, stuffed the rest of his baozi in his mouth, chewed and swallowed, then turned to seriously say to A-Jin’s face, “Then I’ll go and die.”

A-Jin fell silent. He gripped his baozi so tight that the juices ran, staining his hand.

An Xie bent down and licked the juices from both the baozi and A-Jin's hand.

A-Jin lowered his head, staring in silence at that baozi for a long time before asking, "Why?"

Do you really need to be so good to him? Do you really have to give all the affection you have in this lifetime wholly and purely to a single person? Even if the person you offer it to isn't even human? You're not a damn saint!

"It's not only for him. More than that, it's for me, and for you."

An Xie's response was a sudden one. A-Jin was thrown off by this, raising his head again to gaze at him.

An Xie said, "I've been thinking. I've more or less treated him fairly all my life. I've done everything I could; I once swore I'd be good to him for a lifetime, protect him for a lifetime… I can't break that oath I swore. But A-Jin, I owe you. If it turns out that the worst case scenario is true… If he wants me dead, then I should hate him for that, and refuse to take it lying down. If I survive, then I'll definitely have no more illusions about him. If I die, that just means the lifetime I promised him is complete…"

An Xie turned his head, a hint of a smile on his bright and handsome face. He raised his hand to rub A-Jin's cheek in an extraordinarily gentle motion, right over the wound from where he'd hit him earlier. "What I'm saying is, in my next life, I'll be sure to treat you well."

I'll be good to you and only you.

A-Jin’s throat felt tight; his eyes burned and he dropped his head, lips pursed.

An Xie lowered his hand to catch A-Jin’s chin. Those tears soaked into his rough-skinned palm.

“When I die, I want you to keep living a good life. I’ll wait for you down below, and when we meet again in a few decades, whatever I become, whether man or dog, I’ll stick to your ass like glue and refuse to leave, no matter how much you try to chase me off.” An Xie started to laugh. “What I couldn’t give you in this life, I’ll give all of it to you in the next.”

Lips that weren’t the slightest bit moist placed a kiss on the top of A-Jin’s head.

“Liar… You’re a liar…” A-Jin was both laughing and crying. Because the person he wanted had fallen for him. Because if that man died, who could guarantee there would even be a next life?

That night, An Xie didn’t return to his own room. He wanted to stay.

He didn’t do anything, nor did A-Jin. They just held each other, A-Jin leaning into An Xie’s neck to breathe in his scent, while An Xie hugged his waist with lowered head, covering his forehead and hair in a myriad of kisses.

How appealing it could be, to be husband and wife for a night!

They couldn’t bring themselves to sleep, simply leaning into each other, ear to ear and temple to temple.

But the dawn would always come in the end.

An Xie lay on the bed, head pillowed on his arms. A-Jin produced a small box from under the bed, sat down on the bed, and pulled the box’s contents out with practiced ease.

An Xie moved over for a look, and discovered that what lay in the box was, unexpectedly, a piece of needlework. He pushed himself up in astonishment, saying, “I never knew you were actually a woman this whole time!”

“You shut up!” A-Jin shot him a glare that had no real anger in it. “You still haven’t figured out if I’m a woman or not, after feeling me up all over?”

His ears were a little red at the tips as he awkwardly picked up the needle and began to work on the embroidery. A-Jin was a very patient person, and while each stitch was slow, they were precise. The image on

this embroidery was done in gold thread. After staring at it for quite a while, An Xie realized it was supposed to be a pair of mandarin ducks.

A-Jin said, “Around here, people embroider one of these once a marriage is arranged, the woman embroidering it for the man. I’m making two of these—one for you and one for me. If we walk together with these on our belts, it’ll mean we’re a couple.”

There was an incredibly gentle look on A-Jin’s reddened face. His hands, so used to wielding a sword, weren’t very accustomed to doing this sort of work. He pricked himself a few times, but didn’t care, carefully poking the needle in and out with different threads amid the gold as he formed the outline of that pair of mandarin ducks.

Even if you do this, we can’t wear them openly. An Xie opened his mouth, but couldn’t manage to say the words aloud, for fear that A-Jin would send him flying with a kick if he did.

Three more days passed this way.

An envoy carrying the emperor’s decree arrived. This decree was one of condemnation, asking why he still hadn’t set out to exterminate the enemy, and berating him for being a disloyal subject. The stern words within reminded him of the look with which An Chengjing had gazed upon him as he turned to leave the audience hall at their final parting. Fear, restlessness, and avoidance…

An Xie kneeled with the other officers to receive the royal decree and indicated that he would be setting out within the next few days. The envoy nodded with a cold smile, then turned to get on his horse and leave without a moment’s delay, not giving him a single chance to probe for information.

But good news came as well, in that the carts carrying their provisions were currently on the way and would soon arrive.

An Xie sat on a low chair, tossing the decree at his feet. The others, catching a glimpse of his face, didn't dare raise their heads. "Advisor, if the provisions are already almost here, how likely would you say it is that the man up above wants me to die?"

An Xie asked this without any consideration for how many people would hear it. The advisor thought for a moment before replying, "The likelihood is 30 percent."

With provisions, the probability of victory grew quite a bit. If His Majesty truly wanted to kill them, then delivering provisions would be an unnecessary move.

Still, 30 percent was quite a low number.

An Xie swept his gaze over the faces of all the officers before him, as well as A-Jin, then said in a curt tone, "With that being the case, I'll lead a squad tonight to investigate how genuine this news is!"

"Yes, sir!" The officers responded with equally despondent tones.

An Xie picked out a squad and told its officer to come with him to check on the troops. The rest of the men dispersed, leaving An Xie to talk with the soldier by his side.

A-Jin walked over to watch him from afar.

An Xie paused, then waved a hand to dismiss the subordinate who'd been listening to him. "All right, we'll go with that plan. Go organize your men."

"Yes, sir."

The subordinate nodded and ran off as fast as he could to carry out An Xie's orders.

An Xie sighed and walked over to A-Jin. Together, the two of them walked slowly around the base.

A-Jin lowered his voice to bluntly say, "I'm going with you tonight."

I knew it. An Xie raised an eyebrow. "I'm just taking men to investigate whether the news we received is true or not. I'll be back first thing in the morning."

"It doesn't matter. I'm going." A-Jin pulled a long face as he stubbornly walked with his head down.

"You can't go."

"I'm going whether you like it or not."

"A-Jin, are you looking for a beating?" Some anger made its way onto An Xie's face as he said, "I'm the generalissimo, so you need to listen to my orders, got it?!"

A-Jin shot him a look, not showing even a sliver of panic. He could tell just from a look whether An Xie was genuinely angry or faking it.

"I see how it is. You're rebelling, is that it?" An Xie said with a straight face. He was someone often seen with a smile, bright and relaxed ones, as well as happy ones. It was as if he had some special ability to make people feel at ease. But when he didn't smile, that dignity he had as someone of noble birth immediately made itself apparent.

Anyone else would probably get anxious at this point. But A-Jin still kept his head lowered, only casting a single glance at An Xie. "I'm still going."

An Xie had nothing to say to that. He gritted his teeth and, seeing that no one else was nearby, let out a grim laugh before grabbing A-Jin and heading toward his living quarters. He was incredibly strong, and had A-Jin stumbling the whole way there. The door was kicked open and shut again. The two of them crashed into the table and caused all the teacups and plates atop it to smash loudly to the floor before A-Jin was finally pressed onto the bed.

“So you’re going to talk back to me? You’re so bent upon going?”

A-Jin retaliated by throwing a fist at An Xie’s face, but An Xie easily caught hold of his wrist with another grim laugh, using the weight of his own body to press A-Jin roughly against the bed.

“You say you’re not a woman, but you sure keep a close eye on a fickle man, following me wherever I go. It’s not like I’m your man, having to give you a heads-up if I so much as fuckin’ fart!” An Xie tightened his grip, so angry his smile didn’t reach his eyes.

A-Jin was even angrier, asking in return, “Are you really not?”

An Xie was caught off guard. He felt he didn’t have a leg to stand on, here.

Chapter 90:
We'll Live or Die Together with You!

A-JIN ASKED AGAIN, "Aren't you my man? Oh, An Xie, take a good look at your heart. Between me and An Chengjing, which of us is actually true to you?!"

An Xie awkwardly let go of him, taking in how A-Jin's face was flushed with anger, as were the corners of his eyes. He hurriedly tried to placate him in a quiet voice. "How are your eyelids so thin? Are you really going to cry just because I scolded you a little?"

"Like hell I am!" A-Jin cursed. "You're planning to do something, aren't you? I can't be at ease about this. I have to go with you!"

"Tch!" An Xie pressed down again, silently starting to strip off not his own clothes, but A-Jin's.

A-Jin, realizing something, began to struggle. He was skilled in the martial arts, and every blow of his was ruthless, but when he twisted his waist in attempt to pull free enough for an elbow strike, he was surprised to find that An Xie made no attempt to evade. His elbow smashed into an armored chest, but the force of the blow could not be so easily deflected. An Xie grunted on impact, then started to cough.

A-Jin hadn't expected to actually injure An Xie. He immediately paled with fright, twisting around to check on him. But a large, gauntleted hand pushed his head down into the blanket, not allowing him to turn his head.

An Xie sucked in a breath of cold air, his chest aching. “Murdering your superior, are you?”

These words left A-Jin even paler than before. “Did I hurt you, sir? Why didn’t you dodge the blow?!” He anxiously struggled in an attempt to look at An Xie.

But An Xie wouldn’t let him. He let out a few laughs. “What’re you getting all worked up for? It’s nothing. Though if you give me a few more of those, I really will be coughing up blood.”

He reassuringly patted the back of A-Jin’s neck. A-Jin always switched to polite speech when he was afraid An Xie might be angry, transforming himself back into that servant who’d once been humble to the bone.

A-Jin stopped struggling after hearing those words, becoming as obedient as a defanged, declawed tiger. He kneeled before the bed all on his own, his upper body lying prone against the blanket in meek cooperation.

The sight was enough to make one’s heart ache.

An Xie felt somewhat upset. His expression and demeanor both softened quite a bit.

Chilly armor knocked against A-Jin’s skin with a clink of colliding metal, and A-Jin’s eyes reddened. The chill left a layer of goosebumps all across his back. An Xie’s hand loosened his tied-back hair, the scattered black strands serving to make A-Jin’s skin look whiter than ever.

In fact, A-Jin had had very pale skin since birth, having never been jaundiced or sickly-looking. His neck and face were an entirely different color from the rest of his body, tanned from running around with An Xie,

while the skin below was as pale as freshly squeezed goat's milk and slippery-smooth to the touch.

This fool… An Xie placed kisses on his nape and cheek.

Four shichen later, dusk was approaching and the sky was dark.

A servant came over to knock on the door, saying that some of the officers were looking for the generalissimo.

"Got it," An Xie said shortly, not releasing A-Jin's mouth until after the servant left. Without his support, A-Jin kneeled bonelessly against the ground, only for An Xie to lift him by the waist and toss him onto the bed.

He picked up a cloth to wipe off with, arranged his armor, then wetted the cloth with a bit of water and wiped off A-Jin as well.

A-Jin was breathing quietly yet rapidly, his eyes half closed, his entire body brushed a light shade of pink. His lips shone bright, An Xie having bitten off whatever dead skin had remained on them. His body twitched occasionally, his legs entangling themselves with the blanket. This was beyond pity… How could he be so pitiable? It made one want to hug him, to gently comfort him while slowly rubbing his cheeks.

An Xie was somewhat baffled by his own thought process. Then he broke into a smile.

He leaned close to A-Jin's ear and whispered, "You're quite talented. You actually managed to break down a corner of the emperor's wall…"

The person on the bed mumbled something, but his voice was so quiet that it was impossible to hear clearly.

A hand pressed against A-Jin's face, poking at it repeatedly. An Xie was smiling like an idiot. It was a mystery what he was so happy about. He

thought of a book he'd read once, which said: When with the person you like, even a single glance from them can make you feel as giddy as if you were walking on clouds…

The person you like, huh.

After a while, An Xie leaned over the bed, right next to the other man's ear, and asked in a low voice, "A-Jin, what about that brocade pouch you made me? Where'd you put it?"

A-Jin tried as hard as he could to open his eyes, but he was far too tired after the relentless torment he'd just endured. He heard himself reply, in an indistinct voice, "Finished it… Under…the bed…"

After he said this, his vision began to darken. All he could see was the vague impression of a man squatting down to pull something out from under the bed.

His vision then went entirely black, and he fell into a deep sleep.

An Xie, meanwhile, lifted up the brocade pouch with its mandarin duck design and red string, staring at it for a long while before hanging it around his neck and heading out like that.

A-Jin, I told you before: If I die, or if I'm lucky enough to survive, I'll give you everything in our next lives… Clean, upright, free, and unrestrained—my next life will belong only to you.

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After who knew how long, A-Jin abruptly sat up on the bed. He'd had a bad dream where An Xie was killed by someone. Startled from sleep,

he gazed wide-eyed around the room and, after discovering that no one was there, stumbled to his feet, threw on his clothes while leaning against the wall for support, and rushed outside.

What time was it? How long had it been since An Xie left?!

He pushed away the servants who tried to support him and charged into the military base, only to come to an abrupt stop the moment he arrived.

Countless torches were burning away, and all the high-ranking officers were down on one knee at the entrance of the base. These soldiers, who'd once scorned An Xie for his noble status, had now been so subdued by him that they all gazed at him with reddened eyes.

For the first time, the fox-like tactician wasn't smiling cheerfully. There was a heavy look on his face as he stood there, looking on.

This scene was just like…

"Where's An Xie? What happened to An Xie?!" A-Jin roared at them, his heart skipping a beat.

The officers didn't respond. The tactician sighed, before saying in a quiet voice, "The provisions just arrived. A-Jin, why don't you take a look…"

He signaled for someone to carry over a closed sack of provisions. A-Jin walked up to it, pulled out a knife, and plunged it in, tearing a hole in the burlap sack. What should have been grain, pouring out, proved to be grains of sand instead.

A-Jin's pupils shrank to pinpoints.

The tactician shook his head and sighed. “They’re all fake. That man…he wants us to die!”

“The generalissimo knew even before the provisions arrived. He redid his choice of men four shichen ago, and told us all about it…”

An Xie had convened all his soldiers and officers that same night. He didn’t take his place on the stage overlooking the troops, but instead sat on its edge, a jar of wine in his hand. A few servants off to the side carried a large vat of alcohol hung from a pole, while others carried trays with stacks of small wine cups.

His soldiers and subordinates had no idea what they were supposed to be doing. They turned perplexed gazes to An Xie, who said nothing.

It wasn’t until everyone had arrived that An Xie spoke.

The first thing he said was, “The information about enemies on the mountain was false, so the rations are probably false too! The emperor just wants us to die.”

The second thing he said was, “I’ve decided to take a small troop alone up the mountain. I’m the one he most wants dead. If I die, he might spare the rest of you.”

The third thing he said was, “I, An Xie, owe you all an apology. You followed me to the border to protect our homes and defend our country, shedding your blood and laying down your lives on the battlefield for the cause. But in the end… Heh. We’re getting killed off by our own people. I’m selecting twenty men from among you; no only sons, no married men, no one with both parents still alive and well, and no one under the age of twenty. Brothers…” An Xie flashed them a grin, sweeping his gaze over these brothers with whom he’d risked life and limb countless times.

“Whichever of you is willing to die with me, come up to stand on the stage.”

Upon hearing all this, the officers below went from shock, to anger, and finally settled down with reddened eyes. They’d long known there was no shortage of examples of useful people being disposed of as soon as the goal was accomplished. Most of the time, the ones dying were soldiers like them, who could fight or die as their masters pleased. The ones indulging in a life of pleasure were those brush-wielding ministers, who could decide the life or death of entire groups of people with just a quiver of their lips!

The men curled their hands into fists as they sobbed, some of them turning red-eyed gazes on An Xie as they roared, “General, let’s revolt!” *Why bother defending this bunch of dirty swine, if they won’t even see us as people?!*

With someone having taken the lead, the entire group roared in agreement, quickly coming together in unison. “Revolt against him! Revolt! Revolt!”

An Xie, sitting on the stage, lifted his wine jar and started to drink. Once he was finished, the smile on his face suddenly changed, and he darkly tossed the jar at the feet of the loudest of the officers.

Crash—

Everyone shut their mouths.

“Revolt? Bullshit!” An Xie pointed at them and sneered. “You talk as though revolution is so damn easy, like you’re going to just ignore your wives and children, moms and dads! If I die, then you all won’t have to, got it?! Twenty-odd men dying, versus two hundred thousand—can’t you guys frickin’ count?!”

By the time he was done with his tirade, the officers below had stopped speaking, and some of the younger ones started to cry. “General… we don’t want you to die…”

At this An Xie’s eyes reddened as well, his throat clogging with unshed tears. His lips trembled a few times before he managed to push down the feeling, following it up by baring his teeth in a loud and cheery laugh. “If I, An Xie, am to die for all of you, I’d say that death is worth it!”

He lifted a jar of wine and continued, “Enough talk. I’ll be heading out to deliver those people their meal in a bit, so everyone who’s coming with me, stand up!”

At this, a hubbub arose as a great many people began climbing onto the stage.

“Like hell you’re getting up here—you’re the only one left in your family with a dick!”

“Hah! Fuck off, I’m going up! You should know better than anyone whether you’re married or not!”

“You damn brat, you’re nowhere near twenty! Get your ass back down!”

“I want to go with the general!”

“In your dreams!”

As the men nearly came to blows, everyone red-eyed as they tugged at each other, the tactician, rubbing at the corners of his eyes, yelled out, “Enough!”

The men below the stage all froze, but the ones on it broke out in laughter instead. An Xie looked behind him to find what was definitely

more than twenty men, all grinning cheerfully at him as they shouted in unison: “General, we’ll live and die together with you!”

An Xie viciously brushed the wetness from the corners of his eyes, then stood up and kicked a few commanding officers off the stage. These were his men, and he knew each and every one of them, so he easily picked out those who’d mixed in with the group and tossed them back down.

He couldn’t pull down the rest no matter how hard he tried, though. The remainder all kneeled before An Xie with tears in their eyes and hugged his legs. These were grown men who’d been on the battlefield and killed enemies without ever freezing up or panicking, yet they were now crying so hard that their faces were smeared with snot and tears.

“We’re not going down, not even if you kill us!”

Once they started crying, the men below began trying to climb back up again.

“That’s enough!” An Xie roared hoarsely, then turned to look at the tactician, who was currently covering his face with a sleeve as he sobbed. The sight brought an amused smile to An Xie’s face.

“I’ll go with these, then!”

He pulled up the kneeling men, then had the servants bring up the wine, using cups to scoop it straight out of the vat. There was a cup for each man, and one for An Xie as well.

He laughed without restraint, then roared, “Are we afraid?!”

The soldiers before him all raised their cups and roared back, “No sir!”

“Good!”

An Xie and those soldiers then drained their wine, tossing the empty cups to the floor of the stage where they shattered into countless fragments.

And so he took only twenty-odd men, got on his horse, and left the encampment. The soldiers and officers left behind all kneeled together at the entrance through which they'd departed, and refused for a long time to leave that spot.

Chapter 91:
Bringing the Generalissimo Home!

AN XIE KNEW ALL ALONG that he was going to die…

A-Jin stared in a daze at the soldiers and officers kneeling on the ground.

No wonder… No wonder he refused to promise me…

An Xie was always a smart person. It's just that there were some things he never cared about, or spoke about, so people thought he was careless. But how could I forget?

How could I forget?

A-Jin looked at them like he'd lost his soul, saying, "What are you kneeling here for…?"

An Xie went to his death for us. He went to fulfill the emperor's wish. So what is it that we who still live hope for, or need?

The tactician suddenly kneeled. This tactician, who was always smiling and only ever listened to An Xie's orders, kneeled before him and said, "Deputy General Dai Jin, you are the generalissimo's deputy, so please —order us to go after them! We—we want to live and die with the generalissimo!"

"We won't abandon him! We won't trade his life for some flimsy idea of peace!"

"Give us the order, Deputy General!"

"Give the order!"

Many pairs of reddened eyes pinned their gazes on him with firm determination.

“He traded himself for all of you… If I take you there, it will mean his wishes were for nothing…”

An Xie had acted to fulfill the bastard emperor’s goals of his own accord because he didn’t want that same emperor to find reasons to kill or harm his subordinates. There was no way A-Jin could allow them to follow him. An Xie would hate his guts if he did.

The tactician stared at him, then suddenly called out, voice heavy, “Do you mean to say that you don’t want to chase after him? Deputy General Dai Jin, are you really going to docilely submit to the generalissimo’s wishes and have us hole up here to look on as he gets killed?!”

A-Jin opened his mouth. *I don’t want to.*

If An Xie’s wish came true, then who was going to grant his own? He hated An Xie for so easily abandoning him like this and selfishly choosing death. If An Xie could ignore his wishes, then why did he have to care about how An Xie felt?

A-Jin laughed quietly, then slowly straightened out the armor he was wearing. Over ten thousand men, with ten thousand pairs of eyes, watched his every move.

Finally, he buttoned the last button, took his scimitar in his hand, and gazed out at the crowd with a smile. He said, “Come on, let’s go bring the generalissimo home.”

The officers and tactician before him tightened their grips on their broadswords, making an orderly clanking sound. Their shouts reverberated

across the heavens.

“We’re bringing the generalissimo home!”

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Everyone around him was dead. The twenty-odd brothers he’d brought had gone in front of him, one after the other, to take the brunt of the enemy’s blades in his defense, but they’d been surrounded the moment they entered the gorge.

A contingent consisting of tens of thousands of men, surrounding a group of twenty or so—such a scene was as laughable as it was tragic.

An Xie managed to stand with some difficulty, supporting himself with the black, unadorned shaft of the long spear he gripped.

The bodies of his men and his enemies were strewn all around him. The sight of that mountain of corpses was a testament to how truly brave and powerful An Xie was. His armor was a tattered mess, his arms, thighs, and stomach covered in bloody wounds, but still he stood there, focusing his gaze on each enemy who made an approach.

He seemed as if he would never fall, would never die on his knees, and the sight of him shook these approaching enemies to their core. Every time he fell still, they would think he’d died, but the moment they stepped forward, he’d suddenly start moving again, his face covered in dried blood, and savagely kill anyone who came near.

Droplets of blood arced through the air—both the blood of his enemies, and the blood that sprayed from his own injuries.

A single man, against a force of thousands!

“Yaoguai…”

“He’s a yaoguai, aaahh!”

The sword-wielding enemy soldiers retreated in terror.

It wasn’t until a few horses slowly trotted forward that An Xie lifted his head. He blinked with some difficulty, eyes crusted with frozen blood that obstructed his vision.

The chest piece of his mirror armor had been broken open by sheer force, leaving a huge gap. It was into this gap that an enemy officer now thrust a long spear.

His breathing was already weak. There were black spots in his vision, and he was beginning to sway uncontrollably.

He was going to die.

This was a fact. Even if they didn’t kill him right here and now, there was no way to come back from an injury like this.

Their foes had a custom of cutting off the heads of their enemies to offer as sacrifices. An Xie felt at the part of his chest where he’d placed his brocade pouch, hoping that when A-Jin and the others came to bury his body, they could use it to identify him…

The muscles on his face, frozen hard as steel by the cold wind, failed to form a smile no matter how much they tried.

“You…are a hero.”

The enemy officer looked down at him from atop his horse, the appreciation and admiration in his eyes far outweighing any murderous intent.

An Xie gazed back at him, tightening his grip on his spear.

“Someone like you…would have to be worshipped…in our country.” The man spoke with stiff inland speech, his tone incredibly earnest. He frowned with palpable sympathy. “But your emperor wants you dead. It was he who gave me information. I think you are a hero! Today I tell you the truth. I do not wish you to die an unjust death—cease your struggling. I do not want to kill you, but you cannot push yourself any further. I will not cut off your head. You, I admire!”

The man got down from his horse, and cupped his fist in a salute.

An Xie opened his mouth to speak, only to vomit gobs of blood. He looked at the enemy, then let go of his weapon. The enemy breathed a sigh of relief at that, then bowed with even more sincerity than before. The foreign soldiers behind him all respectfully saluted An Xie as well.

Heh heh… What an insult. The one who wants me dead is the same person I’m protecting, and the one who shows me respect is my enemy…

What use is there in my defending this man who holds himself so high above me? What use is there in my defending this country?

Forget it…

Forget it…

The seething killing intent emanating from his body dissipated. An Xie continued spitting out mouthfuls of bloody clots, grinning as he did so. He was unable to speak, but he could use his expression to signal to his enemies. *Come, give me a quick death!*

The enemy officer understood his look. He shook his head with a sigh, unsheathed his sword, and slowly approached.

An Xie thought he saw A-Jin's face in the snow-white surface of the shining blade. He slowly went down on one knee, narrowing the one eye free from frozen blood.

In the end, he still found himself smiling. He gazed expectantly at that sword, and the face reflected within it.

A-Jin, wait for me.

In my next life…

In my next life…

I'll cleanly, openly, freely—be your man and yours alone.

The blade rose high, but didn't come swinging down.

Someone loudly yelled in a foreign language, "Enemy raid—*enemy raaaiid*!"

Countless people started to panic. Both An Xie and the officer immediately turned to gaze in wide-eyed shock at the lower part of the mountain valley. Warhorses whinnied, and the sound of countless iron hooves and clanking armor rang forth like thunder.

The enemy officer roared something before getting on his horse and charging over. An Xie was unable to make out the words. All he saw was A-Jin on a horse, riding at the very front, with the brothers who'd sworn to live or die together with him all lined up at his back.

They yelled as they surged forward, calling out his name as they fought.

"Where are you, General? We're here to bring you hooome!"

"General—we're bringing you hooome!"

I’m here! Inwardly, An Xie shouted his reply with all his might. But in reality, all he did was stare, staggering a few steps in their direction as he did so.

But when the subordinate at the very front of the assault was cut down, he came to his senses with a start, and opened his mouth in a breathless roar, spitting out a huge gob of blood, which finally allowed him to speak. “What did you all come here for?! Go back—*back*!”

Why did they come to die? Why?!

A-Jin… It was A-Jin!

Once he left, that bunch would all have listened to A-Jin, who was the only one capable of keeping them subdued.

An Xie stared fixedly at A-Jin leading the charge, and A-Jin noticed him too. He shouted something at the man beside him, which An Xie couldn’t make out due to the distance.

But he saw. All of his men looked in his direction. They saw him and consequently rushed toward him.

Don’t come here—

“Don’t come over here!”

An Xie howled angrily, but it was no use. His men had long since decided to join him.

He stood in the deepest part of the enemy lines, enemy soldiers crashing into him from behind as they rushed to meet the charge, while he himself was no longer capable of moving his legs. He could only watch as those brothers who’d eaten at the same table with him, who’d horsed

around in the same tent, who'd shed blood on the same battlefield, fell one after the other…

The two armies crashed into each other, a sight no less cataclysmic than if the heavens were rent and the earth torn asunder. A bloody mist rose within the valley, and rivers of blood flowed across the ground.

The battling soldiers roared with rage, and wildly howled. The wide mountain valley filled with countless corpses, the freezing cold winter weather unable to hinder them.

In battle, An Xie would always be at the very front of the charge, leading his men. But this time, he was watching as they all charged in his direction.

These are my troops! These are the soldiers I led!

Every last man in that mighty army was a righteous soldier of whom he was intensely proud.

Burning hot tears poured from An Xie's remaining eye, and he loudly roared in reply. Firmly raising the spear in his hand, he took a step forward as blood burst from every part of his body.

The next second, he threw himself forward. He didn't know what he was shouting; he didn't know there was a bloodred light in his eye, nor could he see the hideous smile on his face.

If this is how it's going to be, then so be it. There's no undoing what's been done, so I might as well fight to my heart's content! They refuse to let me down, and I am not willing to simply give up like this!

A-Jin caught sight of An Xie, broke out in laughter, and tumbled off his horse to rush toward him.

General, do you see this? You chose to sacrifice yourself to save your brothers. But the choice your brothers made is the same as yours. We're just as willing to sacrifice ourselves to save you.

Many, many soldiers charged toward An Xie, completely surrounding him. They were fearless. They stood at An Xie's back. They were soldiers under their general's command. They'd take each moment of survival as it came!

It was once they were all together that they truly began to fight with bloodthirsty bravery, a dauntless and truly undefeatable army. Even in death, people would loudly sing songs of praise in their honor. They fought in a red-eyed frenzy, their willingness to throw away their lives making them seem like demons returned from hell.

The enemy general watched them in dumb amazement, gritting his teeth as he ordered his own troops to charge forward. They had the advantage of numbers. They couldn't retreat, couldn't give in to fear. They had three times more men than their opponents.

But he was wrong. The men under his command were killed, one after another. Their opponents' numbers were continuously depleted as well, but even if they went from ten thousand to one thousand, to a hundred, to ten…

The enemy general lowered his head to see that the majority of bodies lying around him were his own men. While the enemy troops were all injured, they still struggled to pick themselves up off the ground, even if they were missing limbs or impaled through their stomachs.

"Retreat—" The enemy general's face was dripping with sweat as he yelled, *"They're no longer human! Quickly retreat!"*

In his youth, he'd once heard the people of his father's generation say that some soldiers so steadfastly refused to yield that their corpses would continue to get back up after they died. It was thus that they became an undying army of ghosts. What else could these swaying figures be, but ghosts of the restless dead?!

"Retreeeaat!"

The enemies quickly retreated. They'd won. The general and his men had successfully held them off.

As the remaining men gazed at their disappearing enemies, that last gasp of breath in their chests dissipated. Some standing, some kneeling, some prone—they died, one after the other.

An Xie didn't know the changes that had befallen his body, simply feeling as if he was once again filled with strength. When the few remaining men by his side collapsed, he moved to support them in a panic. But it was no use. Their eyes were wide open, their bodies thoroughly cold. Only a scant few managed to grip his hands before they died, hatefully saying, "Avenge us, General! Take revenge for us! The man in that palace —it was him—"

It was he who abandoned us! We protected him, protected this great country, only for those higher authorities to exterminate us with a single word! We resent it! We resent it all!

The dead gazed with great enmity at this land they'd once pledged their lives to protect. Anger and resentment flared within An Xie's chest at this sight, and he nodded heavily.

His mind was in disarray. After bidding farewell to his last comrade, he looked back, dazedly thinking, *That's right, where's A-Jin? Why haven't I*

seen A-Jin?

He crawled across the ground on his stomach, searching the bodies one by one.

A-Jin? Where are you, A-Jin?

An Xie kneeled on the ground, his mind blank and muddled as he dug through the mountain of corpses.

Not here. Not here, either… A-Jin, where in the world are you? Could you have survived?

Just as he thought this, he suddenly found A-Jin's scimitar beneath an enemy's body, and a tremor ran through his hands. His face was frozen stiff as steel, and he could no longer see clearly, but something poured from his eyes.

He slowly lifted the obstructing limb.

He'd found A-Jin…

A-Jin had been right behind where An Xie was originally standing: loyally, steadfastly defending An Xie's back.

No wonder, An Xie thought. *No wonder I didn't see him. He was behind me all along.*

A-Jin's eyes were quietly shut in sleep. An Xie pulled him out and into his arms, hugging him as he quietly asked, "A-Jin, what are you sleeping here for?"

A-Jin did not reply.

"A-Jin? Wake up."

An Xie patted his face, then turned his gaze downward to find a gash all the way from A-Jin's neck to his stomach. It was very long and very

deep, splitting open A-Jin's armor, and his chest behind it…

A bit of red fabric was visible. An Xie, remembering the single red brocade pouch he'd found beneath the bed, tugged out that split red string with uncontrollably shaking fingers.

The string was tied to a little red mandarin duck pouch.

An Xie recalled A-Jin's red face and the words he'd said.

Around here, people embroider one of these once a marriage is arranged, the woman embroidering one for the man. I'm making two of these—one for you and one for me. If we walk together with these on our belts, it'll mean we're a couple.

A couple.

An Xie tightened his grip around the pouch. His head drooped.

The river of blood was frozen, in this mountain valley filled with innumerable corpses.

After a long moment, a heartrending wail suddenly rang out, resounding across this deserted, lifeless graveyard…

That was the year An Xie and his men fought their battle to the death. A new general quickly arrived with ample rations and countless soldiers to suppress the heavily weakened enemy. Everyone sang praises of the new general's valor, while no more mention was made of An Xie, who was said to have gotten his ten thousand men killed due to his own hubris.

It was also in this year that the jiangshi An Xie snuck into the capital. He saw that his entire household had been executed and their property confiscated; he saw the many imperial concubines and children given titles by An Chengjing.

He entered the palace through a secret passage and killed An Chengjing's entire household in return. When he took the crowned emperor An Chengjing hostage, returned to that mountain valley, and killed him there, An Xie—having realized by now that he'd transformed into a monstrous jiangshi—looked down at An Chengjing's body on the ground and thought: *Because of you, my brothers and family are all dead, and A-Jin too.*

I no longer have a next life; I can only be a monster. A-Jin is gone, but no matter how long he waits, I can no longer join him. And I cannot let him see me like this, either.

"I'm going to torment you for a lifetime."

An Xie smiled as he picked up An Chengjing's body, gazing at the mountain of corpses.

"I'll torment you for the rest of eternity! I'll turn everything you were so proud of to ashes, make you into a hideous monster just like me, and have you suffer eternally without any hope of death!"

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A thousand years later, on Mount Qi, in a couple's grave…

A-Jin woke up to discover that he was sleeping within a casket. He opened his mouth but could make no sound, and there was no feeling in his legs. When he looked down to check, he saw his legs had disappeared.

Was this an injury he'd gotten in the battle? Was he mistaken for a corpse and buried?

A-Jin was calmly pondering his situation when he turned his head to see An Xie was lying beside him.

An Xie?! How'd he get buried together with me?!

At the same moment, An Xie opened his eyes under A-Jin's astonished gaze—and for some reason, he sneered aloud at the sight of him. "You're awake, monster?"

Monster? A-Jin's eyes widened. His open mouth made an *aaaah* sound.

The next moment, the casket lid above him was thrown open. An Xie was grinning, but his eyes were colder than ice as he opened his arms to pull A-Jin up.

The two of them looked into each other's eyes. And A-Jin saw himself reflected within An Xie's eyes.

He stared in stupefaction at his own figure.

I've grown fur?! And it's purple?!

Chapter 92:
Happy Qixi Festival Broadcast
(Main Couple)

WEN FENGJIN HAD BEEN ACTING a little strange lately.

It was nearing the end of summer, and though the weather during the day showed no signs of cooling down, the nights were beginning to carry a chill. The cicadas announced the heat with their high-pitched buzzing. Within the room, Wen Fengjin sat on the sofa, focused on the book in his hands. His body temperature was eternally ice-cold, and not a drop of sweat could be seen despite his wearing long sleeves and pants.

Wang Xiaomie came downstairs after waking from his afternoon nap. But before he could move to Wen Fengjin's side, he saw the man snap his book shut and place it close to his legs but also deliberately far from Wang Xiaomie.

He blinked, his gaze sweeping over Wen Fengjin's face. Failing to find any clues in his calm expression, his attention fell upon that book. "What's that?"

He flopped across Wen Fengjin's legs and reached out to grab the book, only for Wen Fengjin to press a hand down on the back of his neck. "It's nothing all that interesting. Just an average book."

"If it's an average book, then what's wrong with letting me see it?"

"You can't."

"Why not?!"

When had Wen Fengjin ever denied him a thing he wanted?! Wang Xiaomie pushed the ice-cold hand off his neck, shooting Wen Fengjin a suspicious look; Wen Fengjin tilted his head in return, his handsome face unexpectedly bearing a somewhat awkward expression. He refused to meet Wang Xiaomie's eyes.

This behavior… Something was up! Wang Xiaomie narrowed his eyes as he sat up, stretched his claws out in Wen Fengjin's direction, and grinned threateningly. "Xiao-Wenzi… What're you hiding? Is it some X-rated literature?! Show it to us, quickly!"

"Shixiong." Wen Fengjin laughed, his narrow eyes filled with affection. The little red mark burned brightly on his forehead as his intensely handsome face suddenly drew closer.

Wang Xiaomie was taken by surprise. The next moment, he found lips pressed against his own. Soft, full lips ground against his, affectionate and obsessive. That love, so addictive, and the gentle actions that accompanied it were enough to make one sink into the atmosphere Wen Fengjin exuded.

Cold, thin, slender fingers carded through his hair, fastening to the back of Wang Xiaomie's head so that he couldn't move away, drawing him to repeatedly lean his head back in cooperation, unable to resist closing his eyes as he sank into that sweet sea of affection.

His lips were pushed apart, slick and rosier red than before.

Wang Xiaomie's cheeks were flushed, his eyes shimmering wetly as he covered his mouth and gasped. Wen Fengjin peppered more kisses across the tip of his nose, his eyelids, and his forehead. One kiss after another, layered atop each other, each as thickly sweet as candied syrup.

Wang Xiaomie could sense that Wen Fengjin was also starting to lose control. He was pressed into the wide, soft sofa as chilly fingers brushed across his arched neck, and Wen Fengjin lowered his head with mouth opened wide to cover it.

“Ooh—” Wang Xiaomie somewhat ticklishly pulled his neck away.

“Wait here for a moment. I’m going to go get some things.”

Wen Fengjin’s voice was husky, as if he was hinting at something. Wang Xiaomie rolled over to bury his face in a long cushion before nodding, his black hair a scattered mess, and his ears bright red at the tips.

Deep, low laughter rang out, and the sofa bounced once. Wen Fengjin had already gone upstairs.

Wang Xiaomie chuckled to himself, drunk on the memory of Wen Fengjin’s face. *Are we going to do it on the sofa? Not that we haven’t tried it before, but it’s the middle of the day! Even if little Wen Mian’s at school, should we really be doing this in broad daylight? Heh heh heh heh… We’d better close the blinds later.*

All sorts of thrillingly stimulating scenes bounced around his head as he thought this. He waited expectantly for a few minutes, but those few minutes passed without any sign of Wen Fengjin coming back downstairs.

Wang Xiaomie sat up and looked uncertainly toward the staircase. Suddenly, his eyes widened as if he remembered something, and he turned his gaze to the other end of the sofa.

Fuck, the book’s gone?

He rolled off the sofa and ran up the stairs, hurriedly pushing open the door to their bedroom.

The casket lay quietly within the room, not a soul to be seen. There was only an open window, through which a draft of wind blew over Wang Xiaomie's face.

Wang Xiaomie was stunned silent.

Dammit! Wen Fengjin actually escaped out the window!

From the day that incident occurred, Wang Xiaomie didn't say another word to Wen Fengjin. No matter how he hit him, Wen Fengjin accepted every blow, simply refusing to explain himself, and continuing to often go outside. One time, Wang Xiaomie even got up at night to use the restroom and discovered that Wen Fengjin was no longer by his side.

His heart skipped a beat in that moment.

Oh no, if my man's getting increasingly cold, and keeps leaving the house, sneaking out while his wife's asleep… There's definitely something frickin' going on!

The more Wang Xiaomie thought about it, the fishier things seemed.

When An Xie came over for tea, Wang Xiaomie asked him, after a long moment of thought, "Hey, An Xie, do you think Wen Fengjin might… be having an affair?"

"Pfffft!"

An Xie spat his entire mouthful of tea into the air, coughing hard for a good while, before staring in such wide-eyed disbelief at Wang Xiaomie that it was as if he'd grown two heads. "An affair?! Who? Wen-qianbei?!"

"That's right." Wang Xiaomie awkwardly scratched his head. "There's no need to act that shocked."

“How could I not be shocked?” An Xie said. “I’ve been starting to suspect that aside from you, Wen-qianbei can’t even tell anyone’s sex apart, you know? You’re always making him run menial errands, and with the way he looks… But have you ever seen him spare anyone else a single glance? There’s no point asking if the people swarming him have dicks or breasts, because he probably doesn’t even know what species they are!”

Wang Xiaomie’s mouth twitched. “…Isn’t that a bit of an exaggeration?”

“Not at all!” An Xie put a hand to his forehead, feeling a headache coming on. “The idea of Wen Fengjin cheating on you is beyond preposterous. There’s absolutely no way it’d happen!”

“All right…”

Wang Xiaomie saw off An Xie, then started formulating a new plan, with the goal of catching Wen Fengjin red-handed.

And so, that night, he waged cold war with Wen Fengjin as usual, pouting like a petulant child as he went upstairs to sleep. Wen Fengjin pulled him over by the waist, gently saying, “Shixiong… I was wrong. Could you stop being angry with me?”

“No!”

Wang Xiaomie coldly pushed him away. He callously seized the entire blanket and wrapped himself in it like a silkworm chrysalis, muttering as he curled up in the casket and faked sleep.

After who knew how long, so long that Wang Xiaomie nearly fell asleep for real, something soft sucked at the tip of his ear before leaving, after which Wang Xiaomie suddenly came back to his senses.

He cracked his eyes open to slits within the darkness. Wen Fengjin's figure could no longer be seen within the dim casket.

Dammit! He went out again!

Wang Xiaomie's face darkened. He immediately snuck out of the casket in preparation to catch him in the act.

He was confident that Wen Fengjin had gone out, and so he immediately went downstairs…only to suddenly hear the sound of things bumping into each other. At that, he hurriedly quieted his footsteps and peeked out, leaning on the railing of the stairs.

The lights weren't on in the dusky living room. Only the kitchen was lit. Because it was an open-style kitchen, he could clearly see Wen Fengjin inside.

That's strange. What's he doing up this late at night? Is he hungry? Does this mean he's been going downstairs every night to cook food for himself?

Wang Xiaomie shook his head. No, he and Fengjin didn't need to eat, and barely felt hunger at all. How could the man ever get so hungry that he couldn't sleep?

He continued surreptitiously watching. Within the kitchen could be seen the upper body of a man with a glum look on his face, wearing an apron with his silver hair tied back. The light that shone down from above revealed the faintest shadows beneath his eyes, making his face look even colder than normal as he glared with some anger at the pot in his hand.

Snow-white fingers gripped the handle of the pot. The stove clearly wasn't turned up very high, because there was no steam rising from the vessel.

After a while, he dipped his chopsticks in to taste whatever was in there. His brows furrowed into a knot, and the book he refused to show Wang Xiaomie made its appearance once again. Wen Fengjin consulted the book, then picked up a knife and started chopping something.

As the smell of something burning reached his nose, Wang Xiaomie's curiosity grew so strong he was about to go bald from it. What in the world was Wen Fengjin doing?

Finally, he couldn't stay still any longer. He walked right over. A startled Wen Fengjin turned at the sound of his footsteps, following which a helplessly vexed expression appeared on his face.

After a few seconds, he sighed calmly, then gave Wang Xiaomie a smile. Those long, narrow, and inhuman eyes curved slightly as he said, "So I've been found out."

"What are you doing? You've been acting really sneaky."

Wang Xiaomie approached with a frown. He was somewhat astonished when he saw what was in front of Wen Fengjin: chocolate, placed in heated water in the pot, and row upon row of molds in different colors in square and heart shapes.

Wang Xiaomie's lips twitched. He picked up the book by Wen Fengjin's side for a closer look, discovering that it contained instructions, printed in pink, for making homemade chocolate.

He was dumbfounded. "No, seriously, what is all this? Are you telling me you've been acting dodgy, even jumping out the window on me, all for the sake of making chocolate?"

"Mn…" Wen Fengjin turned his face away and gently cleared his throat, looking somewhat embarrassed.

“Why are you making chocolate?” Wang Xiaomie took everything in, the scent of burnt chocolate reaching his nose. “You’ve gone and burnt it. Also, a legendary demon lord making homemade chocolate in the middle of the night… Pfft ha ha ha ha ha!”

Infamous demon lord Boss Wen was even more embarrassed than before—so much so that the tips of his ears even showed the tiniest, faintest hint of red.

Oh my god…

The sight of his blushing ears had Wang Xiaomie laughing even harder than before.

Wen Fengjin pursed his lips as he listened to his laughter, dark eyes staring at Wang Xiaomie, before he suddenly started to laugh as well. “You’re right, it doesn’t suit me very well.”

“Right, exactly—”

“But it *is* Qixi after all, so I felt I should give you something.”

“That’s ri—*what*?!”

Wang Xiaomie stared at the grimly smiling Wen Fengjin as he pointed at the chocolate in the pot, dazedly asking, “You were going to give me homemade chocolate for Qixi?!”

“Mhm.” Wen Fengjin said, “But I suppose I should give up on it. This sort of thing doesn’t suit me, after all.”

He then picked up the pot of chocolate and moved to throw it away. It took a minute for Wang Xiaomie to belatedly leap up with a howl, jumping onto Wen Fengjin’s back and wrapping his arms around his shoulders. “Don’t pour it out! You’re supposed to make me homemade chocolate!

Aaahh, I’m gonna drink this whole pot of chocolate! Whoever tries to pour it out has to go through me first!”

Wen Fengjin lowered his gaze as he said in a flat tone, “But you said…”

“I didn’t say anything!” Wang Xiaomie interrupted him, turning his face around to seriously place a kiss on Wen Fengjin’s cheek from behind.

Their eyes met. Wang Xiaomie said, enunciating clearly, “Hubby.”

“Hm?”

“I goddamn love you more than life itself.”

A soft smile appeared on the face of the beautiful man carrying him on his back. In that instant, Wang Xiaomie felt as if he’d traveled a thousand years into the past to see the coquettish smile that youth had once given him long ago.

Wen Fengjin smilingly said, “Mm. I love you too, more than life itself.”

Wang Xiaomie lay across his back and laughed.

Fingers dipped into the chocolate to swipe it across both their lips, which then finally pressed together, the chocolate being swallowed by who knew which mouth. The burnt, slightly bitter flavor had a strangely thick fragrance. It expanded between them from the tips of their tongues, moving down their throats, and finally brushing a layer of impossibly warm sweetness across their hearts…

There was a momentary pause in this sweetness.

Someone spoke.

“Happy Qixi.”

Someone replied.

“Happy Qixi.”

Chapter 93:
Happy Qixi Festival Broadcast
(Side Couple)

IT'D BEEN QUITE A FEW DAYS since A-Jin woke up to discover what he'd become.

Based on An Xie's rough behavior and ridicule, he'd already grasped, more or less, that he'd become a monster…and that he was in Third Prince An Chengjing's body. The day he took possession of this body had, coincidentally, also been the day a strange grave robber came to the mausoleum and seriously injured said body. Perhaps that was how the real An Chengjing had died, and been replaced by him.

An Xie…had become a twisted man entirely unfamiliar to him. But A-Jin understood why. An Xie came out of that battle having turned into a monster, having lost everything he had, having watched everyone he cared about die in front of him, one after the other. Even the hard-earned romance they'd shared had the curtain dropped on it in such a tragically painful way.

He'd avenged them all, and taken Third Prince An Chengjing's life as recompense. But An Xie had gone mad.

He'd once been a bold and forthright man, a skilled martial artist despite his young age, someone who could campaign on the battlefield just as well as he could throw back drinks with a bunch of rough men and laugh as he casually directed the world around him. One who laughed without restraint, and openly showed his anger. Able to shoulder the responsibility of protecting his country, while simultaneously protecting the tender feelings of love in his heart.

His man, his master, his indomitable hero.

But now…

A-Jin gazed at the vicious currents within the man's eyes as he was lifted by the collar like some kind of toy, unable to speak or move, then tossed onto the ground.

He pathetically rolled a good distance away. Luckily, this body, despite its lack of legs, didn't have much of a sense of pain.

A foot pressed onto his back, and a familiar voice rang out above A-Jin's head as the man squatted down to roughly pull up his head, smashing it into a cold bronze mirror with a loud *thunk*.

An Xie was smiling, but there was no warmth to it at all. He said, "Take a look, darling, and see what you look like today."

Fingers pressed hard against the dry, withered skin of his face. A-Jin lifted his head for a quick glance. Even a hardened soldier like him couldn't help but be frightened by the shriveled, purple-furred monster whose reflection he glimpsed.

The monster in the mirror didn't look the slightest bit human. It had barely any flesh, only skin like paraffin wax stuck to its bones, with lopsided features on a hideous face. It wasn't just monstrous and ugly, but also covered in purple fur.

An Xie grinned delightedly at the sight of A-Jin's frightened expression. He pressed up to him so they were both framed in the mirror, saying, "Heh heh. What's wrong? Does the sight still frighten you, after all the times you've already seen it? Just look at our esteemed lord emperor now, *tch*."

He grabbed the purple hair on A-Jin's face, forcefully ripping off a handful of it with the skin and flesh still attached, and held it before A-Jin for him to look at. "Heh heh, does it look good? Tell me if it looks good."

Though he couldn't feel physical pain, the spot where his heart was located hurt beyond belief. It wasn't because of this body, nor was it because of the way An Xie was treating him. A-Jin knew An Xie's cruelty and fury weren't aimed at him…

He simply felt heartache. Heartache for the man who'd once spoken of living "cleanly and openly," the man who'd been casual, cheerful, and unrestrained on the surface, but always nurtured that seed of gentleness within—only to be pushed by A-Jin himself into becoming the twisted person he was now.

A-Jin really, truly understood An Xie far too well. An Xie was punishing not only An Chengjing, but himself.

Perhaps the heartache in his eyes was too obvious. An Xie met his gaze and was stunned. Then he flew into an even greater rage than before. "Who said you could look at me like that? Are you trying to pick a fight?!"

A-Jin made no attempt to resist as he was beaten. He'd been An Xie's servant since he was a child. An Xie was his master. No matter what happened, if it brought An Xie some relief, then A-Jin was glad to watch him vent his anger on him.

A foot came down on his chest, and A-Jin finally felt pain. But he continued to gaze softly at An Xie. He wanted to say, *An Xie, I've come back.* But he was unable to push a single word from his open mouth.

An Xie's hands were wrapped around his throat, gripping it with such great strength that he seemed ready to snap his neck like kindling. "You

want to die, is that it? You want to die!”

Rage made his handsome face frightening. He stared fixedly into the cloudy, scarlet eyes of the monster beneath him…but those eyes lacked the deathly stillness and despair the suffering usually brought on. Instead, they held only something soft and warm. No matter how much strength An Xie used, he elicited none of the usual unpleasant screams, or frenzied flailing of arms.

He hadn’t seen a look like that in a very long time. For a moment, An Xie couldn’t for the life of him remember where he’d seen it before, despite its familiarity.

It’s so familiar. It really is so familiar. But who used to look at me with such a gentle and tolerant gaze? Who was it…

When turbid tears began to drip down the creature’s face, for some reason An Xie suddenly became afraid. He hurriedly released his grip and watched as the jiangshi An Chengjing lay unmoving where he left him, a wizened claw scratching something onto the floor.

An Xie calmed his complicated feelings and moved closer to look.

When he saw the characters “A-Jin” on the floor, it was as if he’d been struck by a bolt of lightning. He stared blankly at the characters, then turned to look at that familiar gaze.

“A-Jin…”

He stupidly called out the name, and the purple-furred jiangshi on the floor nodded in response.

As A-Jin gazed at his man, he said in his mind, *An Xie, I’m A-Jin. I’ve come back.*

A look of delirious joy exploded onto An Xie's face—only to change into doubt and panic. His expressions changed far too quickly, causing his features to distort in an almost comical way. "No, that's not right…"

An Xie muttered to himself, his pupils shrinking, eyes bloodshot. Suddenly his voice rose in volume, roaring like a madman at A-Jin. "You're not A-Jin! You're An Chengjing! You're trying to trick me into letting you go… It's not possible! I'll never let you get away!"

I am, I really am. A-Jin silently mouthed these words at him. The sight of An Xie's demented visage made him attempt to push himself up in worry.

But an instant later, An Xie suddenly lifted him up and shut him within the casket from earlier. His field of view was once more reduced to a sea of black.

A-Jin attempted to push the heavy wood aside, but the lumber used for the casket was all hard hophornbeam wood, and in his current state, he just didn't have the strength to make it budge. All he could do was lie there and wait anxiously within the casket, praying that An Xie wouldn't do anything to hurt himself. After all, An Xie's current state of mind seemed somewhat dire.

After an indeterminate period of time, the casket was finally opened again, and a somber-looking An Xie returned. He lay down beside him, pulled him into his arms, and shut his eyes without a word.

A-Jin pushed him away and, using hand signs and mouth movements, told him a great number of things in order to prove his identity. Things that happened when they were little, secret signals only the two of them knew, and trouble they'd mischievously gotten themselves into. In the end, he

even brought up things like how many times An Xie had slept with him, in what ways he'd been embraced, and the positions they'd used.

But An Xie's gloomy expression didn't go away, nor did he utter a word. Though there were no more of the savage beatings from before, he also gave him no response of any other kind.

A-Jin was afraid. He didn't fear An Xie treating him roughly; he feared that An Xie might have forgotten him.

I'm A-Jin! An Xie, don't scare me, okay? Master, do you still remember A-Jin?

Only silence ensued.

The days passed, one after the other, and eventually turned into years.

An Xie carried him along wherever he went, wrapped in a white cloth in his arms. He held him when he slept, held him when walking around in the mausoleum, held him even when wandering around outside on the mountain.

After all these years, A-Jin's heart had turned ashen with discouragement.

But one day, An Xie suddenly took him to meet a couple living in another mausoleum.

An Xie once again wore his bright and open smile, and though a part of it was false, the happiness was genuine. An astonished A-Jin was held in his arms, wrapped in white cloth, unable to speak.

That day, when they returned to their mausoleum, A-Jin was laid down in the casket, held in An Xie's arms.

He assumed it would be another peaceful day, but then, to his surprise, An Xie suddenly spoke up from beside him.

He said, “Thank goodness, it isn’t a dream.”

A-Jin stared blankly at him, failing to understand what he meant.

An Xie didn’t stop. He hugged him so tightly that it was as if he wanted their very bones to meld, his chin resting atop A-Jin’s head.

After a long time, he said again, “Thank goodness, it isn’t a dream… You said you’re A-Jin. You said you’ve come back… I was scared. I was so scared. I was afraid that it was all fake. I feared it was just a dream.

“I didn’t dare sleep, I couldn’t close my eyes, but I also couldn’t bring myself to ask you. I was afraid that if I asked, ‘A-Jin, have you really come back,’ you’d answer, ‘Yes,’ and then I’d wake up…”

Something hot fell on top of A-Jin’s head. One drop after another, turbid and bitter to the taste. They soaked into A-Jin’s hair.

A-Jin dazedly turned his head to look, only to see an extremely sorrowful face, soaked with tears but still stubbornly suppressing the sound of crying.

“I spent every day living in fear. I was so scared… A-Jin, A-Jin… When I spent all that time walking down that road, carrying you, it all felt so real. But it’s been over a thousand years, and I’ve spent every day imagining you by my side. I was afraid that you were just a product of my imagination, and that I’d actually gone mad…”

After hearing all this, A-Jin finally understood. It wasn’t that An Xie didn’t recognize him, but that he didn’t *dare* to. He thought that A-Jin’s return was a fantasy created by his mind, that he’d gone mad after these thousand years.

That was why he'd chosen silence. That was why he'd held him in his arms every day, wrapping him in a white cloth and refusing to let any mirror or lamplight illuminate him. That was why he'd spent every day wandering the mausoleum, wandering the mountain, looking for something that could prove that this wasn't just a very convincing illusion.

Carefully carrying him, all these years, he'd spent every day trembling in fear. It wasn't until today that he finally received a definite answer from the keen master of that other mausoleum…

The idiot…

This idiot!

A-Jin turned and viciously pummeled An Xie's chest, wet tears flowing from his cloudy eyes. He couldn't help but open his mouth wide to release unpleasant cries, putting everything he had into cursing out this man who'd pushed him onto the path of destruction.

That day, two people who looked no different on the outside—and yet, were entirely changed—held each other in their arms and cried for a very long time. It wasn't until their throats were dry, their strength spent, and a thousand years of hurt and grief had been completely cried out, that their tears finally ceased.

An Xie held A-Jin in his arms, carefully asking a question with an unpleasantly hoarse voice.

He said, "A-Jin, have you come back?"

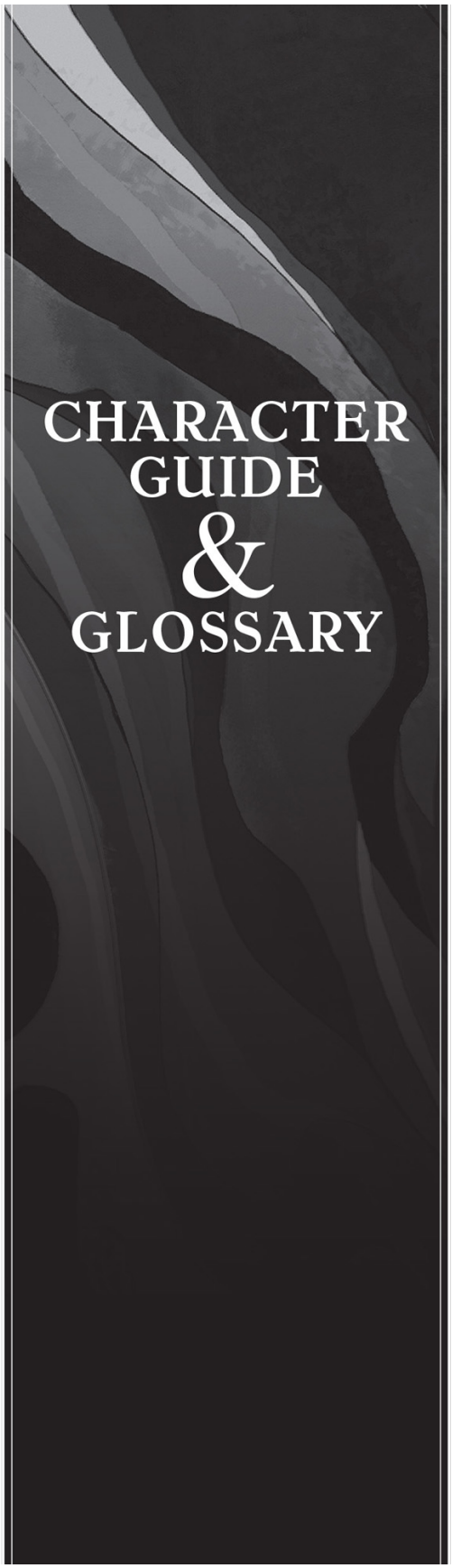
A-Jin gripped the front of his clothes, opening his mouth to wordlessly reply, "I've come back…"

It was as if he’d actually heard it. Hugging him harder than before, An Xie lowered his head to kiss A-Jin’s now-hideous face, licking his lips with a rough and anxious energy, as if trying to confirm something.

And A-Jin accepted it all with total willingness.

A few tiny candle flames flickered within the mausoleum, banishing a thousand years of loneliness…

My Husband and I Sleep in a Coffin
FIN


CHARACTER
GUIDE
&
GLOSSARY

CHARACTERS, NAMES AND LOCATIONS

The identity of certain characters may be a spoiler; use this guide with caution on your first read of the novel.

Chinese characters may have many different readings. Each reading here is just one out of several possible readings presented for your reference, and not a definitive translation.

CHARACTERS

MAIN CHARACTERS

WANG XIAOMIE 王小咩:

Surname Wang; Given Name Xiaomie, “little baa”

A modern-day otaku who has lived alone since he was a child, he wakes up one day to discover his soul was transferred to the body of an undead bride in a thousand-year-old mausoleum.

Weapon: Enlightened (开明 / Kaiming): A short knife that heats up when it comes in contact with evil people.

MIAN DENG 眠灯:

Surname Mian; Given Name Deng, “sleeping lantern/light”

Titles: Da-shixiong

The original owner of the body Wang Xiaomie finds himself in, Wen Fengjin’s shixiong, and the oldest head student at the academy they went to a thousand years ago.

WEN FENGJIN 闻风尽:

Surname Wen; Given Name Fengjin, “to exhaust the wind”

Titles: Anlou Demon Lord

A tyrant who terrorized the country a thousand years ago, with an obsessive love for his shixiong from his school days.

Weapon: Voidcrosser (廖越 / Liaoyue): The famous sword of the demon lord.

BAI YU 白玉:

Surname Bai; Given Name Yu, “white jade”

An orphan and the last surviving member of a line of Artisans. He’s been teaching himself the family trade while searching for his missing grandfather.

YI YAN 一言:

Surname Yi; Given Name Yan, “one word”

A shady but experienced Artisan with an undying grudge against all nonhumans and a particular love for creating/controlling animated puppets.

AN XIE 安偕:

Surname An; Given Name Xie, “to accompany in peace”

An undead general who lived and died two hundred years after Wang Xiaomie and Wen Fengjin were buried. He became a powerful jiangshi due to his grudge against the emperor he was once in love with.

SUPPORTING CHARACTERS

JIANG LEILEI 蒋蕾蕾 “FLOWER BUD”

A professional swordsmith and part-time grave robber who gives the main couple an entire mansion in exchange for a sword.

XIAO-AN 小安

A living puppet created by Yi Yan, in the form of a young girl.

AN CHENGJING 安成静

Emperor of the country An Xie once fought for, who betrayed him and was murdered in turn. Now a jiangshi living in a shared mausoleum with An Xie.

WEN MIAN 聞眠

Wang Xiaomie and Wen Fengjin’s daughter.

DAI JIN 戴锦

An Xie’s deputy general, former servant, and childhood friend. Deeply in love with his master.

LOCATIONS

XUANFENG ACADEMY 玄风书院

An academy located deep in the mountains, leading it to also earn the nickname of “the hermitage sect.” It had connections to the emperor of the Northern Kingdom, and had a great number of students, but they were all wiped out by Wen Fengjin a thousand years ago.

THE KINGDOM OF GREAT AN 大安国

The country An Xie and company came from.

THE SOLDIERS’ MAUSOLEUM

An unnamed mausoleum, much smaller than the one Wang Xiaomie and Wen Fengjin live in, and built into a different mountain, in which the emperor of Great An is interred together with An Xie and his entire company of soldiers.

NAME GUIDE

NAMES, HONORIFICS, AND TITLES

Diminutives, Nicknames, and Name Tags

A-: Friendly diminutive. Always a prefix. Usually for monosyllabic names, or one syllable out of a two-syllable name.

DA-: A diminutive prefix meaning “big.”

XIAO-: A diminutive prefix meaning “little.”

-ER: An affectionate diminutive suffix added to names, literally “son” or “child.”

LAO-: A diminutive prefix meaning “old.”

-ZI: An affectionate suffix meaning “son” or “child.”

-XIONG: A word meaning “elder brother.” It can be attached as a suffix to address an older male peer.

Family:

DI/DIDI: Younger brother or a younger male friend.

GE/GEGE/DAGE: Older brother or an older male friend. If you have more than one older brother, your oldest brother would be ‘dage’ while the second-oldest would be ‘erge.’ In a modern context, dage is used to express respect for a man about the same age as you.

JIE/JIEJIE: Older sister or an older female friend.

-SHU: A suffix meaning “uncle.” Can be used to address unrelated older men.

DIEDIE: Father.

Martial Arts and Tutelage:

LAOSHI: Teacher.

SHIFU: Teacher or master, usually used when referring to the martial arts.

SHIZUN: Teacher or master. For one’s master in one’s own sect. Gender-neutral.

SHIXIONG: Older martial brother, used for older disciples or classmates.

-QIANBEI: A respectful suffix for someone older, more experienced, and/or more skilled in a particular discipline.

XIANSHENG: Teacher of academics. In a modern context, xiansheng is used similarly to “Mister.”

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Mandarin Chinese is the official state language of mainland China, and pinyin is the official system of romanization in which it is written. As Mandarin is a tonal language, pinyin uses diacritical marks (e.g., ā, á, ǎ, à) to indicate these tonal inflections. Most words use one of four tones, though some are a neutral tone. Furthermore, regional variance can change the way native Chinese speakers pronounce the same word. For those reasons and more, please consider the guide below a simplified introduction to pronunciation of select character names and sounds from the world of *My Husband and I Sleep in a Coffin.*

More resources are available at sevenseasdanmei.com

Wǒ Hé Lǎogōng Shuì Guāncai

- Wǒ: as in **wool**
- Hé as in **huh**
- Lǎo as in **law**
- Gōng: pronounced like **go**-ng

- Shuì: Sh as in **shh**, ui as in **way**

- Guān: G as in **g**et, uan as in **wan**

- Cai: C as in **ts**ar, ai as in l**ie**

Wáng Xiǎomiē

- Wáng as in **wan**ted

- Xiǎo: X as in **shh**, iao as in **yaw**

- Miē: M as in **m**iss, ie as in **ye**s

Wen Fengjin

- Wen as in **wen**t

- Feng: pronounced like **foe**-ng

- Jin as in **jin**x

GENERAL CONSONANTS

Some Mandarin Chinese consonants sound very similar, such as z/c/s and zh/ch/sh. Audio samples will provide the best opportunity to learn the difference between them.

x: somewhere between the **sh** in **sh**eep and **s** in **s**ilk

Q: a very aspirated **ch** as in **ch**arm

c: **ts** as in pan**ts**

z: **z** as in **z**oom

S: **s** as in **s**ilk

CH: **ch** as in **ch**arm

ZH: **dg** as in do**dg**e

SH: **sh** as in **sh**ave

G: hard **g** as in **g**raphic

GENERAL VOWELS

The pronunciation of a vowel may depend on its preceding consonant. For example, the “i” in “shi” is distinct from the “i” in “di.” Vowel pronunciation may also change depending on where the vowel appears in a word, for example the “i” in “shi” versus the “i” in “ting.” Finally, compound vowels are often—though not always—pronounced as conjoined but separate vowels. You’ll find a few of the trickier compounds below.

IU: as in **ewe**

IE: **ye** as in **ye**s

UO: **war** as in **war**m

GLOSSARY

While not required reading, this glossary is intended to offer further context to the many concepts and terms utilized throughout this novel and provide a starting point for learning more about the rich Chinese culture from which these stories were written.

ARTISAN: People who are capable of creating a variety of special tools and weapons, including Zhen Bei's jiangshi-killing hammer and various objects in Wen Fengjin's own treasury. Their knowledge is passed down only through the male line, and never leaves the family, causing the Artisan community to stay relatively small.

BALALA MAGIC FAIRY WAND: 巴啦啦小魔仙 *Balala the Fairies* is a Chinese magical girl series.

CULTIVATORS / CULTIVATION: Cultivators are practitioners of spirituality and martial artists who seek to gain understanding of the will of the universe while also attaining personal strength and expanding their life span.

CUT-SLEEVE: A slang term for a gay man, which comes from a tale about the Emperor Ai's love for, and relationship with, his male court official in the Han dynasty. The emperor was called to the morning

assembly, but his lover was asleep on his robe. Rather than wake him, the emperor cut off his own sleeve.

DALANG: Wu Dalang was a figure in the classic *Water Margin* who was cheated on by his wife. She later poisoned his medicine and ultimately killed him.

EAGLE AND CHICKEN: A children's game similar to tag or duck duck goose, in which the child playing as the eagle tries to catch one of the children playing chicks, while another child playing the mother hen tries to defend them.

FUSHI: A type of jiangshi that doesn't rot, and spends most of its time lying on the ground like a normal corpse so that it can pop up and surprise you. The fu in fushi means to hide or lie prostrate.

HANBA: A mythical species of yaoguai with the power to cause droughts. In this novel, a jiangshi with high enough cultivation can evolve into a hanba.

HUMANE FIST: Also called the Hokuto Ujo Hagan Ken or the Humane Face Breaking Fist, this is a move used by Toki from the famous anime/manga *Fist of the North Star*.

INCANTATION OF THE GOLDEN HOOP: The spell that the monk Xuanzang used to activate the circlet stuck on Sun Wukong's head in *Journey to the West*.

JIANGSHI: Also called "hopping corpses" or "Chinese vampires," jiangshi are a type of undead that appears in Chinese folklore. Said to be formed when a person's soul is unable to leave its body after death, they are traditionally described as having pallid, furry skin (likely due to the presence of mold on actual corpses), and go around draining the life essence of living human beings.

JIU YIN WHITE BONE CLAW: A fighting move from the classic wuxia novel *Legend of the Condor Heroes*.

MAKOTO-GE: Makoto is the protagonist of the anime *School Days*, who was famously decapitated by one of the girls.

MERMAID-OIL LAMPS: According to legend, the tomb of China's first emperor, Qin Shi Huang, is lit with lamps fueled by mermaid fat, which can burn for eternity without needing to be relit.

NONHUMANS: 异族 literally means "different race/nation," but in the context of this novel is used specifically to refer to nonhuman creatures such as jiangshi or immortals.

PAN JINLIAN: Wu Dalang's wife in the classic *Water Margin*, who cheated on him and then poisoned him to death.

SHICHEN: Before the introduction of western chronology, the Chinese measured a day in twelve shichen rather than twenty-four hours, with each period being named after one of the twelve Earthly branches (used together with the ten Heavenly stems to measure hours, days, etc.). One shichen is therefore about equal to two hours.

SIMMONS: The Simmons Bedding Company is an American major manufacturer of mattresses and related bedding products, based in Atlanta, Georgia.

SYSTEM: A common trope in transmigration novels is the existence of a "System" that guides the character and provides them with objectives in exchange for benefits, often under the threat of consequences if they fail. When Wang Xiaomei was transmigrated into Mian Deng's body in the past, the system issued him a mission contingent on his relationship with Wen Fengjin.

ZONGZI: A zongzi is a type of Chinese rice dish made with glutinous rice, stuffed with different fillings, and wrapped in leaves (usually bamboo, though this can change depending on availability). It is traditionally eaten during the Duanwu Festival every summer. In this book, however, the term is used to refer to an undecayed living corpse, a use that was popularized by

the Chinese fiction series *Daomu Biji*, or *Grave Robbers' Chronicles*, as well as an earlier series called *Gui Chui Deng*, or *Ghost Blows Out the Light.*

Footnotes

Chapter 46: In the Habit of Pretending

[1] The phrase “dog food” is used to refer to public displays of affection in modern Chinese pop culture.

Chapter 47: Bai Yu’s Family

[2] Lit. “big white.”

Chapter 55: Truth Bug

[3] A brand of drink. Walnuts are said to be good for the brain.

[4] A form of poison from Chinese folklore.

Chapter 69: This Journey

[5] “Fengzi” means “lunatic.”

Chapter 71: Love Is a Ray of Light, and It’s a Goddamn Green One

[6] A Chinese idiom that means to be cuckolded.

Chapter 74: I’ve Left the Warehouse, and I’m Feeling Fine

[7] A reference to a line spoken by one of the astronauts on Shenzhou 7, the first Chinese space mission to carry a 3-person crew for a full multi-day operation.

Chapter 77: So You're Here, Bro?

[8] An idiom meaning to pay a high price for trying to outwit your enemy.

Chapter 78: The Old, Frail, Sick, and Disabled

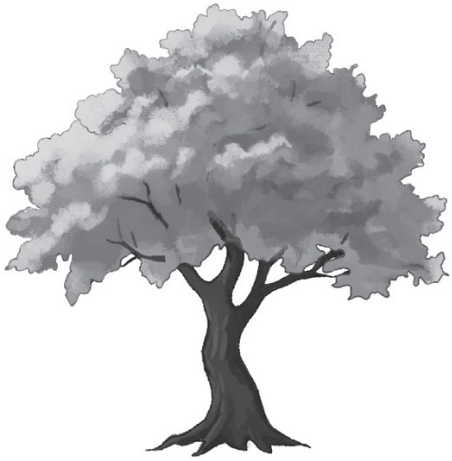
[9] This is the truncated version of a children's nursery rhyme.

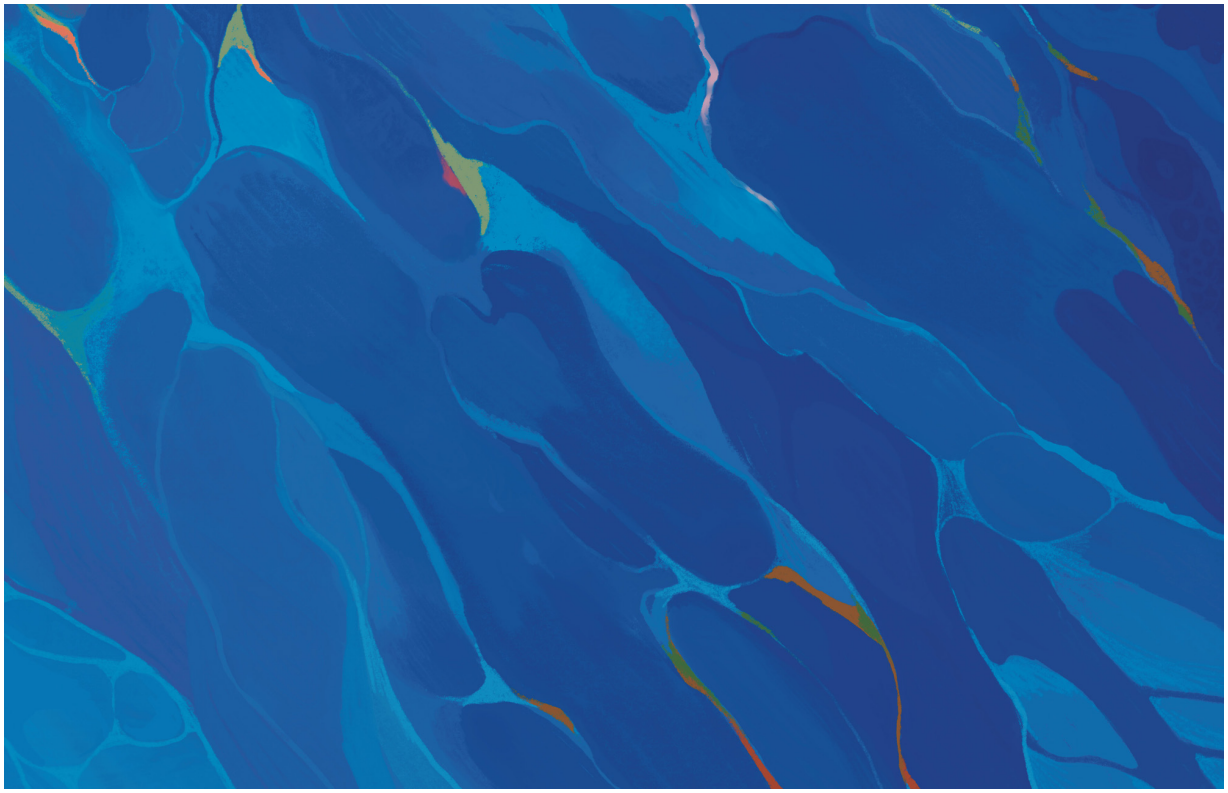
Chapter 80: A Lancer's Luck Is Ever E Rank

[10] A reference to a character from Fate/Stay Night, whose canonically terrible luck is an ongoing source of comedy.

Chapter 85: Epilogue

[11] 狗蛋: Dog balls.





A Centuries-Spanning BL Fantasy Romp!

Creature Comforts

Newly emerged from their mausoleum, Wang Xiaomie and Wen Fengjin settle into a life of domestic bliss, surrounded by all the comforts and conveniences of the modern world. But life among the living isn't as peaceful as it seems. Lurking in the shadows is a secretive group known as the artisans—a community that forges magical weapons designed to hunt down and destroy supernatural creatures like them.

When the undead duo rescues a hapless young man from the brink of death, they catch the attention of a powerful artisan with a bitter grudge against their kind. Now, with betrayal, mind control, and the sudden return of an ancient ally, Wang Xiaomie and Wen Fengjin must fight to keep their love alive—and their bodies intact.

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